NF

ISSUE #57: THE PATH TO THE PAST

KIRBY AND THE FORGOTTEN LAND

SPLATOON 3

BAYONETTA 3

MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

MARIO + RABBIDS SPARKS OF HOPE

TRIANGLE STRATEGY

RUNE FACTORY 5

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD 2

WARS 1+2:
T CAMP

MUTANT

EVERYONE REALLY IS HERE . . . AGAIN!

OUR CELEBRATION OF the latest Super Smash Bros. continues, in wall poster form!

Packed alongside our last physical issue was an "extension poster" that connected together with an earlier poster to complete a full tableau of all of the playable characters in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate. There was a three-year wait while Nintendo brought us one DLC addition to the roster after another, but ultimately we were able to assemble the completed image that we first started way back with NF #36.

And now we're doing something similar again . . . but with much less of a wait between pieces of the picture this time around!

The most striking and iconic image to come out of Super Smash Bros. Ultimate has been the mega-wide banner presenting all of the fighters striking dynamic action poses. As each new DLC character has been revealed, this banner has been updated to include them, slowly growing more and more crowded. Now, with the final player in play (Kingdom Hearts' Sora), the banner is finally finished. The finalized image is certainly a poster-worthy piece of Nintendo art!

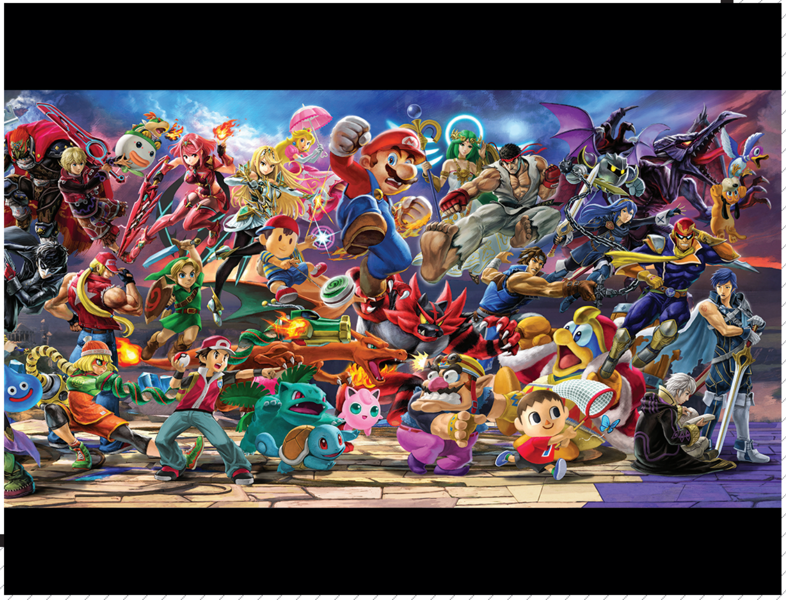
But . . . there's a problem. The banner is so crazily wide that it can't very easily be printed on a single sheet of wall poster paper. We *could* do that, but the result would be really tiny vertically – so small that it wouldn't quite qualify to even be called a poster at that point.

So we're splitting it up! The full extent of the banner art will be yours to display if you collect the printed version of this NF issue, #57, as well as the physical copies of our next two publications, Issues #58 and #59. Each of this trio of issues will include one third of the complete Ultimate banner as the "B Side" of the wall poster packed alongside. If you place all three next to each other in a line on your wall, you'll be able to assemble the full, majestic image! *(Note that there's a little bit of overlap on the edges to help you line them up precisely – Litle Mac's face is on both the right side of Piece #1 and the left side of Piece #2, for example. Just overlap those bits when you're hanging them up, and you'll be all set!)*

I hope you enjoy this three-part Ultimate Smash poster! **— LUCAS**

+

+



ISSUE #57: THE PATH TO THE PAST

CONTENTS

INBOX
4

NEWS
8

DOWNLOAD
15

COMICS
7, 14, 43,
61, 64, 81

PREVIEWS
28

FEATURES
44

RETRO
55

INTERVIEW
62

REVIEWS
65

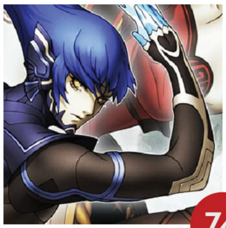
COMMUNITY
78

NEXT ISSUE
82

56

30

26


74

40

44

41

34

58

83

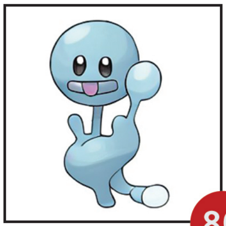
66

70

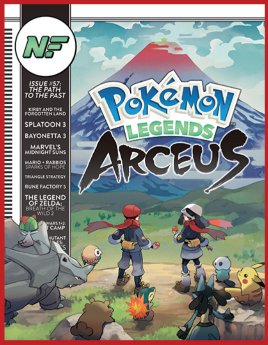
62

36

50


80

22



ON THE COVER

Mount Coronet looms in the distance as a pair of Trainers from the past look out across the expanse of the Hisui region. It's Pokémon Legends: Arceus claiming the cover position this time, marking the fifth time the Pokémon series has earned that honor! This game promises to be unlike any other the franchise has ever presented before, though – we'll dive into the differences in the pages ahead! (And welcome to the 10th year of Nintendo Force Magazine!)

JANUARY/ FEBRUARY 2022

INBOX

HAVING A BLAST IN THE PAST!

The well-oiled machine that keeps cranking out new Nintendo games has run on a few different kinds of fuel over the decades, but as we enter the year 2022 it's safe to say that pure nostalgia is its preferred source of power! With so much Nintendo history now in the books (and the magazines) and so many happy memories living in the minds of multiple generations of players, it's totally understandable why just about every new product the company puts out does its best to tap into that appreciation of the past and get as many of those players as possible to want to relive those most memorable moments.

No recent game hits that nail so squarely on its head, though, as January's upcoming release of Pokémon Legends: Arceus! And that's because it taps into the past two times over. First, it's setting its adventure in the Sinnoh region, instantly drawing in the attention of anyone who first played Pokémon Diamond, Pearl or Platinum on the DS over a decade ago. (Or Brilliant Diamond or Shining Pearl just a few weeks ago!) But more than just revisiting a past region again, Legends: Arceus is also delving into the actual past *of* that region! It takes place not in the "present day" of the Pokémon world, but rather back when Sinnoh was barely settled by humans at all. Back in an age when it wasn't even called Sinnoh yet! It was called Hisui!

That two-pronged approach to presenting "the past" is so fascinating that we've made it the theme of this issue: "The Path to the Past." Our central feature will prep you for your time-travel trip to the lands of Pokémon Legends: Arceus, too!

We'll also look to the future with a robust 2022 Year in Preview that should get you excited about the whole year of new releases that lie ahead. Here's hoping this year will be a great one for you and all your loved ones!

LUCAS M. THOMAS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ISSUE #56: NOVEMBER/ DECEMBER 2021

Our run through 2021 was called done with an issue headlined by a game that's now due to debut in 2022! We charged ahead with plans to keep the upcoming remake of Advance Wars 1 and 2 in the spotlight, though, since we didn't have enough advance notice to be able to change targets at the last minute! See, even Nintendo is not immune to unforeseen circumstances forcing a retreat in the 11th hour.

We're confident no late delay will hit Pokémon Legends: Arceus, though, so we asked these questions last time: Do you prefer to play adventures that take place in the past, the present or the future? Which part of Pokémon's planet do you most prefer? And which starter Pokémon did you pick for Brilliant Diamond or Shining Pearl, along with the one you're planning to choose in Legends: Arceus? Here's what some readers had to say:

LETTERS

For an RPG, I would prefer the future.

For the best Pokémon region, I would say the Kalos region.

For the Diamond & Pearl remakes I would prefer Piplup. For Legends, I choose Rowlet. **– GABE GATTI**

I'm a huge sci-fi buff, so when playing RPGs or adventure games, I'm always most interested in ones set in the future. That said, games like Chrono Trigger have spoiled me, and my favorites always end up being ones that involve time travel in some way, so I can get the best of all three worlds!

This might be an unpopular opinion, but my favorite Pokémon region is Unova! When I was a teen, I had a bit of a phase where I was "too cool" for Pokémon. But for my 16th birthday, my Mom surprised me with a copy of Pokémon Black. I started up the game, not expecting much, but I immediately fell in love with the new monsters and the region! The environments felt so varied and original, and even today I never get tired of exploring Unova. I always seem to find something new!

For the Diamond & Pearl remakes, I picked Chimchar, and for Legends, I'll be picking Cyndaquil. What can I say? I love Fire-types! **– ASH ROBINSON**

Probably because your name is Ash. What if your name had been River? Or Forest? *What then!?*

The time period I prefer in an RPG is the present, because it feels like I'm playing in my own neighborhood.

I think the Kalos region is the best, because I think France is a really cool country, and I realy like Xerneas.

I will probably choose Piplup and Oshawott, because I've chosen the Water-type in every single playthrough except Let's Go Pikachu! **– ALEX H.**

In an RPG, I really like my games set in the past. It's cool to see what it was like when there was no internet!

In Pokémon, I like the Alola region. No particular reason, I just think it's nice.

STARTERS!!! Your MOST important Pokémon! I would like Chimchar (for its cuteness factor) and Rowlet. Rowlet and I have a history: In Pokémon Moon, I chose Rowlet! **– LILLY BEGGS**

I like to play in the future because of all the advanced technology. Also the awesome bad guys. That's my favorite!

Personally, I like the Alola region. Because of all the new Pokémon. Also you can get a bunch of Legendary Pokémon in Ultra Sun & Ultra Moon from Ultra Wormholes!

For Brilliant Diamond or Shining Pearl, I would probably pick Turtwig. Because I like the way the sprout is on its head, and the moves it can learn. Now for Legends: Arceus, I would want Rowlet, because the Alola region is my favorite region and I really like Grass-types. **– MARCO MERLINO**

Who's to say really how we should even delineate past, present and future? Do traditional Pokémon games take place in the present? It's not the same world as ours, so you can't really make a judgment on the "when." For all we

ALTERNATE TIMELINE COVER ART

What if Nintendo Force had gotten its start all the way back in 1988? What if Nintendo Power had never ended, but kept on rolling through the Wii U and Switch generations and ended up having Metroid Dread on the cover of an NP issue? NF reader Alex, a.k.a. AMinecraft1202, imagined both of those scenarios and decided to produce this pair of images to give us a glimpse into those alternate realities. Who knows? Maybe there's a whole multiverse of Nintendo Force and Nintendo Power and Nintendo Power Force magazines out there! (Hi, Alternate Lucas! Your beard looks great!)

know, Pokémon Diamond & Pearl is a prophetic story about the dangers of beaver breeding that some time traveler sent to us as a cautionary tale from the future.

The best region in the Pokémon series is definitely Unova. That place has everything – beaches, deserts, forests, mountains, concrete jungles. Even ancient castles and towers! I just wish it had universal human healthcare . . .

I'm always one to give the little guy a shot. My team in Shining Pearl is composed of the biggest rejects in the region – Lumineon, Chatot, Carnivine and even Mothim, whatever that is. It follows then that I'd choose the starter Pokémon with the least love, the least competitive usage and the least attention in the anime – good 'ol Turtwig! **– COLE DURRETT**

For the first question I choose present, because there's no better time than the present!

For the second question, the Hoenn region is the best because I grew up playing Pokémon Emerald.

And for the third question I'll choose Turtwig, because I like Grass-types a lot. Next, for Legends: Arceus, I'll choose Rowlet – because I like Rowlet a lot! **– JACOB CROMBIE**

Given a choice, I usually prefer RPGs that take place in the past, especially ones with feudal or medieval settings.

It's tough, but I think Alola would have to be my favorite Pokémon region. While its physical layout may not be as interesting to me as some other regions, it is home to my favorite cast of characters in the series. Meeting and forging bonds with Hau, Lillie, Gladion, Kukui, the trial captains, the Kahunas and (to a lesser extent) Team Skull made my adventure in Alola the most memorable Pokémon adventure I've had to date (speaking as someone who started with Gen I).

Turtwig was always my favorite from Gen IV, so that one's an easy choice for me. Legends: Arceus is a little tougher, but at the end of the day, I have way too much nostalgia for Gen II not to go with Cyndaquil. **– ANDREW PEERMAN**

When it comes to RPG settings, I don't really have a preference – I'm on board for all of them and then some.

I'm not here to say which Pokémon region is best – I'm not throwing my hat into that arena – but I will say my personal favorite is the Hoenn region. I have such fond memories of that place, both in the originals and the remakes, that no other region has topped, not even the nostalgic Kanto and Johto regions or the beautiful Sinnoh region.

For the DP remakes I'm going to pick the same starter I did for the originals: Piplup. I don't know what it is, but I love Piplup and will always pick that little penguin. For Legends it's a toss-up between Cyndaquil and Oshawott. I love all the Johto starters, so Cyndaquil is a definite favorite in this lineup, but I've always felt Oshawott looks like Hello Kitty, and as a fan of Hello Kitty it's hard not to want Oshawott. **– TEENKITSUNE**

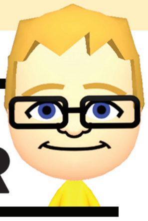
I prefer to play in the present or the past; most games "in the future" tend to be a little bleak. (There are a lot of apocalypse scenarios!)

Sinnoh is my favorite region! I played and was a huge fan of the original Red & Blue when they first came out, and then never played any others until Pokémon Platinum, which reignited my love for Pokémon!

Picking a starter Pokémon is always so hard! I don't try to plan on which one I'm picking; instead I make the decision in the moment. Which Pokémon feels like *my* Pokémon? This time, it was Chimchar! **– JOHN NADEAU**

Thanks to everyone who wrote in to share your preferences and picks!

CARTER'S CORNER



Hello again!

The answer to the quiz from last time is five! I beat all four Ultimate Challenges in the Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle main adventure, and one in the Donkey Kong Adventure. (They're pretty hard, but I beat the Donkey Kong one first try!)

In this Carter's Corner, I'll tell you about the boards in Mario Party Superstars. First is Yoshi's Tropical Island, Difficulty 1. It has Whomps, an item shop and two places where the Star can be. Next is Space Land, Difficulty 2. And it does have a lot of spaces! It has two Koopa Banks, gates that can be unlocked with Skeleton Keys and a Bowser satellite that will steal your Coins if you're not careful. Then Peach's Birthday Cake, Difficulty 3. Only one Star Space, spaces with Lakitus and Piranha Plants . . . and I won on this board! On my birthday! After that is Woody Woods, Difficulty 4. It has a happy tree, a grumpy tree, three Koopa Banks, gates and Monty Moles that change your path every turn! Last is Horror Land, Difficulty 5. (It's not very difficult, though.) It's my favorite because it has two Boos, Peepas, King Boo, a Mr. I that can warp you, Whomps, and every two turns it changes from day to night or night to day!

Pokémon Brilliant Diamond Quiz! I have a Grass/Ground-type and a Normal/Flying-type. What are those Pokémon? Find out next time!

DESIGN REVISION!

The next great Game & Watch is revealed! Jonathan's 6-year-old son Ryan dreamed up this Kirby-themed continuation of the G&W product line, which includes a Snow button (to "freeze" the action) and a Sun button (to thaw things out again). There's even a Mystery button that's unlabeled! What does it do? *Does Ryan even know?* (Thanks for sharing your great drawing, buddy!)

THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Lilly Beggs**, the winner of our Pokémon Legends Player's Poll! Your new chance to win is below, and this time around we're interested to read your responses to some questions about Kirby and the Forgotten Land!

QUESTION #1

Kirby is setting out on a 3D adventure for the first time ever! Do you enjoy games with 3D worlds, or do you prefer to play games that stick to 2D?

QUESTION #2

Kirby's worn a lot of hats and wielded a lot of powers over the years. If you could give him one new power, what would it be?

QUESTION #3

Kirby's new game seems to be "post-apocalyptic" (or set in an abandoned city, at least in part). What are your thoughts on settings like that?

Send your responses to **PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #58" – this time, one reader whose answers are picked for print will win the new Kirby and the Forgotten Land when it arrives this Spring!

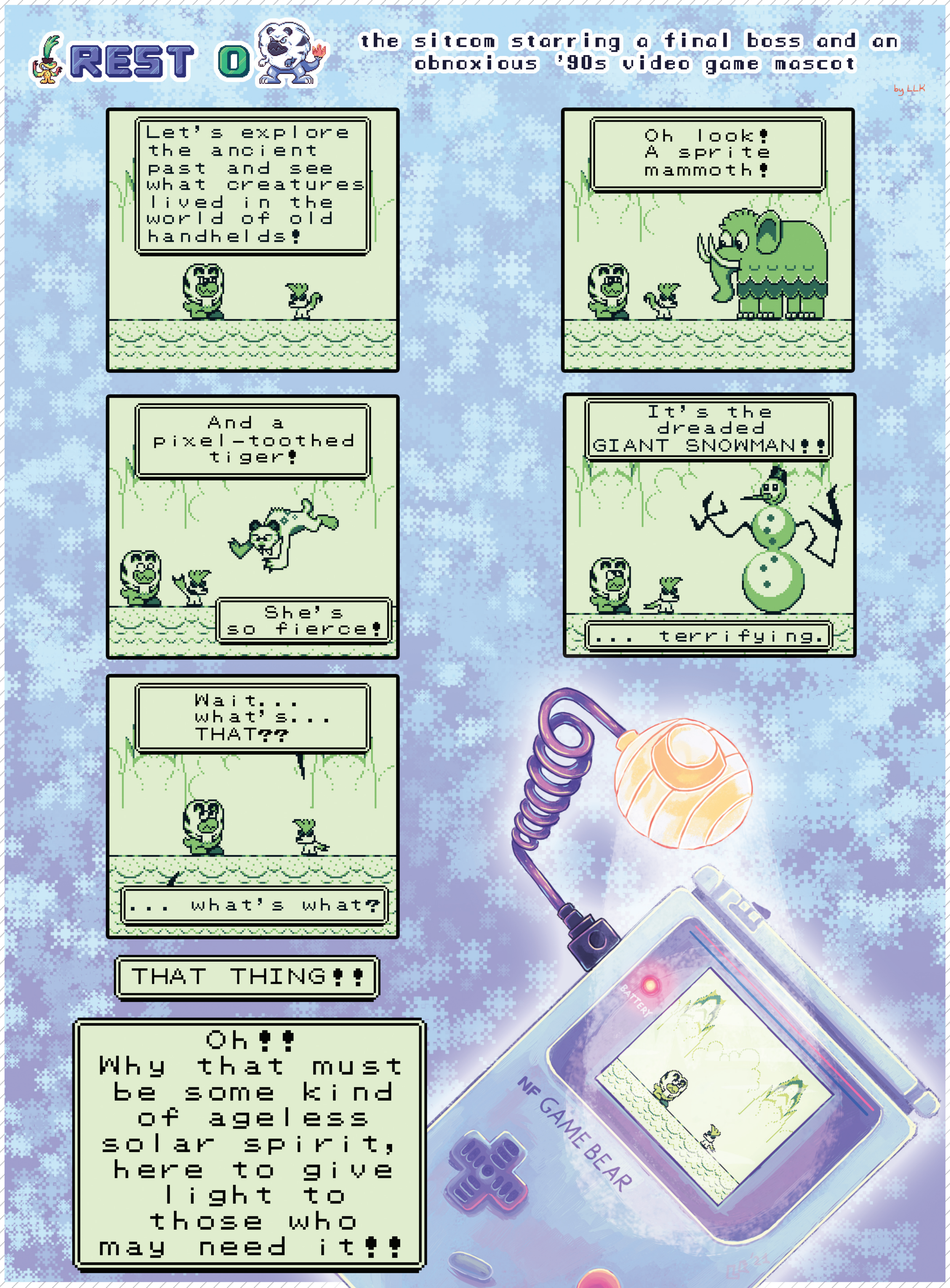
NINTENDO FORCE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Lucas M. Thomas
@NintendoForce

STAFF WRITERS
Evan Campbell
@evancampbell
Jonathan Holmes
@NonTrotski
Kevin Knezevic
@kevknez
Maggie Jones Lutey
@AvengerMags
Brett Martin
@NightramVGMM
David Oxford
@LBD_Nytetrayn
Nadia Oxford
@nadiaoxford
Tony Ponce
@megaStryke
Kris Randazzo
@GeekadeKris
Rebecca Rudranath
@strawbecky_81

STAFF ARTISTS
John-Charles Holmes
@Sonic9jct
Lindsey Layne King
@LuminousLungKey
Matthew Loffhagen
@kotorcomics
Matthew Taranto
@MatthewPTaranto
Thor Thorvaldson
@thormeister1971

CONTRIBUTORS
Ryan Holmes
Rebecca Stone
@forestminish
Meghan Sullivan
@Meghan_IGN
Carter Thomas



BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING

The Architect

Remembering Masayuki Uemura.

MASAYUKI UEMURA, the lead designer of the Nintendo Entertainment System, has passed away. Without him, Mario might not have become a household name, the Switch might have never existed and video games would undoubtedly be in a very different place.

After the home console crash of 1983, the future of video games was uncertain. And so the stage was set for Uemura, the head of Nintendo's Research & Development 2 group, to leave his mark. While working at Sharp Electronics developing solar sensor technology, he was recruited by Gunpei Yokoi (the creator of the Game & Watch, the NES Zapper and the Game Boy). From there Uemura went on to design all kinds of game hardware for the Big N, including 1973's Laser Clay Shooting System and 1980's Computer TV Game home console. All that work culminated with the release of the Famicom in 1983, the first Nintendo console to use interchangeable cartridges. It was a massive hit.

Two years later, the Famicom launched outside of Japan, sporting a new name and a very different look. With a front-loading interface made to mimic the feel of a VCR and support from Mr. Yokoi in the form of the Zapper and R.O.B., the Nintendo Entertainment System became the most popular home console that the world had ever seen, doing double the numbers of the Atari 2600. It was a pivotal moment for Nintendo, and games as a whole.

Uemura also worked as a first-party game producer, shepherding the release of the Famicom/NES port of Donkey Kong, as well as original 8-bit sports titles like Tennis and Baseball. But it was just a matter of time before he got back to soldering circuit boards and drafting up blueprints for D-Pads! After the success of the NES, he went on to work on the Famicom Disk System, the Super Famicom/SNES, the Satellaview (an early online-only games service), Super Game Boy 2 (a Game Boy adapter for the SNES) and Kirby Tilt 'n' Tumble, the first motion-sensitive handheld game. Creating universally appealing machines that would bring the work of developers like Shigeru Miyamoto, Eiji Aonuma and Satoru Iwata to life — that was Mr. Uemura's calling.

His final commercial project was Navi Trackers, a special minigame included exclusively in the Korean and Japanese versions of The Legend of Zelda: Four Swords Adventures that used the GameCube and up to four Game Boy Advances at once. It was a fitting goodbye to the family of hardware that Uemura helped create.

After that, Masayuki Uemura retired from the video game industry, spending the rest of his days teaching at Ritsumeikan University at Kyoto, where he led the Center for Game Studies department. He spent his entire life working to make the future of video games a reality. He passed on December 6, 2021. He was 78. **— JONATHAN**

Mega Movie

Live-action Mega Man moves forward at Netflix.

I WAS THERE in 1994 when Jean-Claude Van Damme flash kicked Raul Julia in the live-action Street Fighter movie. I was there in 2002 when Milla Jovovich took on the zombies of Raccoon City in the live-action Resident Evil movie. I *wasn't* there when Milla Jovovich again adapted a different Capcom brand, Monster Hunter, as a live-action film in 2020 (because I heard it was terrible), but I at least know it exists.

And that's why news of a live-action Mega Man film being in the works isn't too surprising to me.

Capcom hasn't exactly crafted Oscar-worthy cinematic masterpieces through their attempts to transform their video game properties into live-action movies, but the company clearly sees the value in continuing to do so, as, well, they continue to do so. Word has it that their next effort will be based on Mega Man and that it's planned to debut on Netflix at some point in the future.

How far in the future? That's hard to say, as it seems like the project is still early in the development process. It's actually already been in the development process for something like seven years (if not longer), as Capcom previously announced a writer and director back in 2018. Knowledge of the film is just bubbling back up to the surface now since Netflix recently greenlit production after liking what they saw of it so far through a first-look deal with Chernin Entertainment.

So, how will live-action Mega Man work? Will an actor portray Mega Man himself, or would he be rendered via CGI? Perhaps some kind of hybrid of the two? And, sorry to disappoint, but we probably won't be getting Vin Diesel. (Gotta love that old meme, though!) **— LUCAS**

The Show's Over

Time's run out for Nintendo Minute.

NINTENDO LIKES TO pull the plug on things in December, it seems, as the ninth anniversary of the end of Nintendo Power magazine was commemorated by the company cancelling Nintendo Minute!

It's a bummer to say goodbye to the show. Hosted by Kit Ellis and Krysta Yang, Nintendo Minute was a weekly YouTube show that kicked off all the way back in May 2013 – it was nearly as old as our magazine! A variety show of sorts, you never quite knew what you'd get from the pair, as sometimes they'd be goofing around playing new releases with each other and cracking jokes, while other times they'd have serious sit-down interviews with big-name Nintendo developers. Everyone from Eiji Aonuma to Shigeru Miyamoto to Kensuke Tanabe got a turn to talk to Kit and Krysta!

No longer having a regular YouTube show featuring that level of insider access will be a major blow, but here's hoping there's a plan to pivot to something different that will fill the gap left behind. **— LUCAS**

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

LIVING WITH LIFE-SIZED LUCARIO

At nearly four feet tall, this Monster's not fitting in anyone's Pocket.

WHERE WOULD YOU put a life-sized Lucario? For $420 and a short wait you can make your answer a reality!

Shipping this April, this ludicrously large Lucario plush stands nearly 48" tall – in keeping with its Pokédex listing. While Lucario looks pretty stiff (it is part Steel-type, after all), its arms do bend for limited posing.

I've never had much luck with doing much of anything with giant plushes, as the stuffing tends to be just sub-par popcorn pellets, and the stitching on something this large can give out fairly easily. Then again, I've never spent close to this much money on a giant plush before! Pokémon items from The Pokémon Center are known for being of good quality, and this Lucario does look better than a beanbag chair.

I can't imagine they'll be making too many of these, so the price will only go up barring the unforeseeable. The pre-order period ended on December 16, but there may be some that are made for general sale.

Imagine an army of Lucario soldiers boxed up on a truck, ready to be distributed across the world! Even one would be an intimidating addition to any home security solution!

DARE TO ENTER LEGO LUIGI'S MANSION

The LEGO Super Mario series is heading in a spooky new direction!

ONCE LUIGI SHOWED up in LEGO Land, I expected him to just play along with the other LEGO Super Mario expansions. I never dreamed that they would release Luigi-specific sets!

LEGO has announced that a flurry of Luigi's Mansion-themed sets will launch January 1.

With the $30 set, Luigi gains his Poltergust from Professor E. Gadd – who appears on his first piece of merchandise ever! A ghost is also in tow. The $40 set has the mansion entryway, complete with a Boo and Bogmire to contend with. Defeating them will net you a golden bone for Polterpup! The $80 set features the mansion interior, complete with a couple of pesky poltergeists and King Boo himself.

There are other sets that were announced too, so keep looking out for the new stuff!

GET JIGGY WITH IT!

How has this never existed before now?

FANGAMER WAS BUSY throughout the month of November, releasing all sorts of new goods. New items from A Hat in Time, Mega Man, Psychonauts, Breath of Fire, Undertale, Deltarune, Hollow Knight and more came out weekly amongst their annual holiday sale. Plushes, apparel, pins and several more unique items wowed fans. But one piece specifically caught my eye.

Banjo-Kazooie got a new Grunty plush, a shirt and something that seems like it should have been on shelves since 1998: a B-K jigsaw puzzle! With Jiggies being the most iconic collectible in the game, you'd think it would be a no-brainer, but here we are. 1,000 puzzle pieces will interconnect to make a picture of Banjo collecting . . . a Jiggy. It's so meta. $26 will net you the puzzle, and you can grab some Jinjos or a Jiggy pin to round out your purchase.

At this point, if you haven't found something on Fangamer's site that entices you, I'm not sure we can be friends. All of their stuff is high quality and hits fans right in their feels!

BY BRETT MARTIN

New Mario Board Games

Add extra Mushroom flavor to your tabletop time!

EPOCH HAS BEEN making Mario tabletop games for ages, including several air hockey variations. This localized set has both circular and triangular pucks and can be played by two to four players (if everyone snuggles up). Another game that just recently released both in Japan and here is Fire Mario Stadium, where Fire Mario and Fire Luigi take aim at various enemies and targets for points and bragging rights. Lastly, Ravensburger's Labyrinth game has been around for almost as long as Mario, and now the two have collaborated to bring a unique version to the table with a Mario twist. I've found all of these at various retailers, so keep your eyes peeled for them!

For Lucky Fans Only

If you want these Animal Crossing items, you have to win them!

KUJIS ARE EXCLUSIVE prizes won in a "guaranteed win" lottery system. Ichiban Kuji events are pop culture-themed affairs held at convenience stores in Japan where consumers buy lottery tickets and vie for the most coveted prizes in the offering.

Mario, Zelda and Kirby have all had such events put on by license holder Bandai Spirits through their Banpresto division, and they've had some of the best and most unique items in the collector world. Not only are they rare and collectible, but often functional, as most center around home goods like plates, towels and clocks.

These are so successful that Kirby has had several events, Mario has had a couple and this is actually Animal Crossing's second go – a Timmy & Tommy plush tissue case was the main prize in the first AC set. They aren't simply events to get goods at a cheaper cost – these exclusive and immediately elusive promo prizes can sell for big money and attract all manner of folk hoping to score an easy reseller payday or a rare collectible.

With this new Animal Crossing Ichiban Kuji prize set, the Gulliver plush is a "Last One" item, meaning only the person to buy the last ticket gets the plush. With only one random person receiving it, it is the rarest item in the set. The "Tom Nook with workbench" kitchen timer is the next most coveted prize – it has music and sound effects from the game to alert you when the timer is done. There's also a Nook Miles ABD Machine piggy bank that produces the appropriate sound when a coin is deposited, and rounding out the collection is a set of three shovel spoons, character and item towels, five turnip plates and some Able Sisters memo pads.

Kanto's Kicks

Pokémon crosses over with the Converse brand.

MARIO HAD VANS; now Pikachu gets Converse. Some unique Chuck Taylor All-Stars emblazoned with various Pokémon emblems and characters were made available on December 10. The original Kanto starters, Pikachu and Meowth all had unisex high-top offerings release. Two toddler low-top offerings featured Pikachu and Jigglypuff, and had the character's faces on the front. (Basically the cutest shoes ever.)

The most featured shoe was the Poké Ball Chuck Taylor All-Star featuring all of the aforementioned Pocket Monsters line-drawn on white. It's a work of art! There was also a long-sleeve shirt, a Pikachu hoodie and a Pikachu short-sleeve shirt that rounded out the line.

SONIC'S SEQUEL!

Blasting back to the big screen on April 8.

AFTER ITS INITIAL teaser trailer, no one expected the first Sonic the Hedgehog movie to be watchable, much less even good. And while voices are split on the latter, there's no denying that the *much* needed overhaul given to the title character helped endear him to $319,700,000 worth of moviegoers worldwide . . . and helped pave the way for a sequel, of course.

Though some leaked behind-the-scenes images from the new film gave us some idea of what to expect, little was said officially until the days leading up to the 2021 Game Awards, when a poster appeared online showing Sonic on the wings of the Tornado, with Tails in the pilot seat and an Eggmobile-driving Robotnik and his mechanical minions in hot pursuit. While the first movie was clearly a more grounded origin story, the sequel appears poised to welcome us to the next level.

Following an introduction by stars Ben Schwartz (Sonic) and Jim Carrey (Robotnik) at the Game Awards show itself, a trailer played, beginning with a nod to Sonic Adventure, wherein Sonic channels his inner rooftop-leaping superhero with mixed results. Tom (played by James Marsden) offers some words of advice to Sonic, but it looks like he'll be sitting most of this one out as he and his wife go on vacation.

While that happens, a much more Eggman-looking Robotnik returns, having discovered "the source of ultimate power," which director Jeff Fowler has confirmed to be the Master Emerald. As per the poster, we get a cut to Tails (played by Colleen O'Shaughnessey, reprising her role from the games) introducing himself to Sonic amidst an aerial assault on the Tornado.

Then, after a few action cuts, the moment everyone has been waiting for arrives, as Sonic states, "Face it, you're never going to get my power."

Stopping the electrified, spinning Blue Blur right in his tracks with one hand, Knuckles the Echidna (voiced by Idris Elba) asks "Do I look like I need *your* power?" before spiking our hero down like a pointy-haired volleyball.

That's right: We've got Sonic *and* Tails *and* a more Robotnik-y Robotnik *and* Knuckles (you didn't think he'd be far behind with the Master Emerald in play, did you?), all in the same movie.

Fowler admitted to IGN that it was difficult not to bring in Tails and Knuckles in the first film, "but it was great to make a film that introduced Sonic on his own, established him as a character, established the pre-Eggman version of Robotnik. Now we're just getting to open the world up [and] tell a much bigger story."

"We're telling a Knuckles story," Fowler would add when clarifying we weren't just seeing one of the regular Chaos Emeralds, noting that it's kind of a package deal. He also teased that we might see other magical talismans in the story, but wouldn't say for sure.

In much the same way the original Sonic the Hedgehog game was over-shadowed by its sequel, it looks like the movies are set to follow the same trend. Could it set the new standard for good video game movies in our day? We'll know in April! **— DAVID**

FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

IT ISN'T OFTEN that the month of January hosts major new game releases, but 2022 is breaking the trend with Pokémon Legends: Arceus! January 28 is its debut date – and also, I suppose, the first day of an all-new era for the Pokémon series as a whole! This game plays unlike any the franchise has ever offered before, and we break down what you can expect in our "The Path to the Past" feature beginning on Page 44.

AS WE HEAD to press with this NF edition, the month of February is looking light on big new game launches – the next truly notable title would be Square Enix's Triangle Strategy, due to debut on March 4. It's their latest "HD-2D" effort, looking a lot like Octopath Traveler, visually speaking. But it plays totally differently! See Page 37 for more.

LESS THAN ONE week later, Square Enix will ship another new release to the Switch: the happy-go-lucky Chocobo GP! Swinging from serious strategy to goofy kart racing might cause some players' heads to spin, but good news: Chocobos have very twist-capable necks! (Well, maybe not the short, stubby Chocobos appearing in this game. I guess long, bendy necks aren't truly "kawaii.") Have a quick look over on Page 28!

KEEPING THE WINNING "Peanut Butter & Chocolate" flavor combination of farming + fighting alive on March 22 will be Rune Factory 5, which once again invites you to step into the workboots of a young man or woman who cultivate crops by day and then moonlights as a dungeon-crawling, sword-wielding warrior. Check out Page 38.

BEYOND THE MONTH of March, we don't yet have pinned-down release dates for many more games. Not as December draws to a close, anyway! Hopefully Nintendo will bless us with a fresh Direct early in January that will reset our sights for games like Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp, which was meant to arrive on December 3 before being hit by a last-minute delay. That gave me time to replay the original, though! See Page 33.

RUMORS CURRENTLY HAVE it that Advance Wars might end up deploying in April now, and it could be quickly followed by this new game starring everyone's favorite Pink Puffball! That's because further rumors suggest Kirby and the Forgotten Land is already finished and Nintendo's just waiting for the right time to release it. See it on Page 34!

> It's always a pain to have to endure delays when there are great-looking games on the horizon and we just want to play them as soon as possible! But all of the pushbacks we've seen through the last two years seem to be resulting in 2022 having the most stacked release schedule for the Switch, maybe ever! As the New Year begins with such promise, though, I'm going to cross my fingers and hope 2022's best and brightest don't slip back into 2023! – **LUCAS**

WE'VE OFFICIALLY ENTERED the Expansion Pack era of Nintendo Switch Online, meaning there are now four different retro systems that will be getting new titles added to their Netflix-esque browse-around-and-play-a-bit lineups.

At least, that's the hope. Nintendo has been *so slow* to add new games to these apps . . . and often what we've been offered have been some truly bottom-of-the-barrel titles. Upping the frequency – and quality – of fresh additions to the subscription service is something the Big N should consider as a New Year's resolution for 2022.

That said, the N64 game selection is at least getting the year started on the right foot with the addition of Banjo-Kazooie! The original Rare-developed 3D platforming adventure of the bear and the bird is January's confirmed expansion of the Expansion Pack offerings.

It's a great game, but seeing it return to Nintendo hardware is especially notable since Microsoft (of Xbox fame) now owns the B-K franchise! They were kind enough to allow Banjo and Kazooie to appear in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, and now they're letting the original game get relaunched on Switch too. Huzzah!

BY JONATHAN HOLMES

Back to the Old West . . . with Robots!

Get ready to return to the futuristic frontier in SteamWorld Headhunter.

THE STEAMWORLD SERIES refuses to keep itself tied down to a single point on its timeline.

When the series debuted in 2010 with SteamWorld Tower Defense, it presented players with an alternate take on the Old West – one where steam-driven sentient robots had evolved and outplaced humans. Its follow-up, SteamWorld Dig, took place just a bit later in that same setting (or underneath it, rather).

But then SteamWorld Heist, the third game, took the tale into a far-flung future! It showcased a setting in outer space, and steambots who had evolved even further and mastered interstellar travel. Then Dig 2 bounced back to the Old West again. *Then* the fifth game, SteamWorld Quest, wound the clock all the way back to medieval times to tell a tale of swords and sorcery . . . which actually ended up being a fairy tale told in the future!

It's been a wild, time-skipping journey so far – and the series isn't letting up with its next installment, either. SteamWorld Headhunter is now in development, and it will once again revisit the series' chronological roots with an Old West world full of robots. But it will also push the franchise further into the future than it's ever gone before, as it will be a fully 3D third-person action-adventure game – with co-op support, to boot!

No gameplay images have been shared yet, but teasers like these early concept art pieces point to what we can expect. See the robot head that's rocketing off his body in the image above? That seems to be hinting at the game's main gameplay feature, as you will likely control a headhunter whose literal head can come off at will. (He's a robot! It's OK!) Maybe you'll be able to attach yourself to different bodies? Whatever the case, I can't wait to blast back to SteamWorld's past! **– LUCAS**

It's Always Darkest Before the Dawn

Capcom's burning the midnight oil to prepare the massive expansion Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak.

MONSTER HUNTER HAS long followed the Street Fighter template of content updates, in which a flagship game comes out one year, followed by an expanded version the next year, followed potentially by yet another expansion the year after that. Squeezing every last cent from a single software generation with repackaged releases at full price: That's the Capcom way!

Or rather, that *was* the way, as greater acceptance of digital delivery means that DLC has taken the place of retail boxes. Monster Hunter World introduced 2019's Iceborne in this manner with excellent results – not only were new players welcomed and those weary of the base game encouraged to return, fans who chose not to upgrade also benefited from a larger pool of fresh hunters to campaign alongside. It's only natural, then, that Monster Hunter Rise would follow those same tracks.

Entitled Sunbreak, the upcoming Rise add-on promises the usual array of expansion treasures. We're talking monsters from games past as well as terrifying new faces, new hunting locales, new actions and, of course, Master Rank, the proverbial cherry on top.

For novice hunters, mainline MonHun typically divides quests into Low and High Rank, with the latter providing greater risks with even greater rewards. Then the expansions arrive with an even more blood-curdling quest tier, previously named G Rank, that features monsters so deadly that a couple swipes of their craggy appendages can send you to an early grave. In short, only the most experienced hunters need apply!

Further details are limited as of this writing, but at least we know of two monster additions. First up is Shogun Ceanataur, a colossal crustacean who debuted way back in Monster Hunter 2 and recently reappeared in Generations Ultimate. However, the star of the show is Sunbreak's headliner, the Elder Dragon Malzeno. This vampiric beast made its grand entrance during the game's September Nintendo Direct reveal, and without even demonstrating its abilities, it already has players quaking in fear and anticipation!

If you do happen to be a Rise newbie hoping to jump into Sunbreak immediately upon launch, you best rein in that wild Palamute of yours! Would you dare not heed these warnings of impending doom? Best brush up on your skills for several dozen hours before attempting to punch above your weight class. You won't even be able to access the Sunbreak content until you've completed the 7-star Hub Quest "Serpent Goddess of Thunder" and defeated the Elder Dragon Narwa, anyway.

On a bittersweet note, we also have word that Rise will land on PC soon – but Capcom will not be implementing cross-play or cross-saves. Alas!

We're still half a year away from Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak's launch in Summer 2022, with tons of titanic terrors yet to be revealed. Break out the whetstone and sharpen your blades before then! **– TONY**

REVIEWS

7.0

Let's Do the Time Loop Again

LOOP HERO

THE CALCULUS SEEMS simple: Mash together disparate yet complementary genres to produce an experience greater than the sum of its parts. Sometimes, though, the resulting composition is so unorthodox that it becomes nearly impossible to fathom from written description alone . . . so follow along extra closely!

Loop Hero is one such genre chimera. The general idea is that most of the universe has been erased by The Lich – thus, you must guide a lone Hero around a literal loop while slowly rebuilding the world from scratch. And by "guide," I mean you don't directly control your avatar, but instead populate the path with the very monsters they're tasked with slaying.

This gestalt gumbo is composed of several key ingredients. Most notable is the RPG aspect – the Hero's stats are split into typical categories, from Defense and Counter to specialized traits like health-absorbing Vampirism. You'll also gain the ability to change classes, swapping between a brutish Warrior, an equipment-hoarding Rogue and a Necromancer that summons a skeletal army.

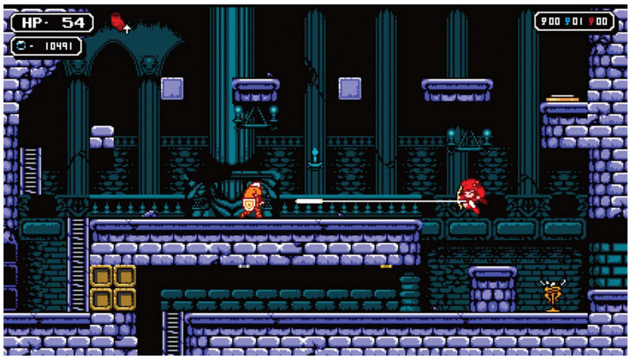
It's also part roguelike – each fresh Expedition generates a barren zone with a procedurally drawn loop, while the Landscape that can form and the gear you can earn will likewise be randomized. Loop Hero is more forgiving than typical roguelikes in that you can choose to quit an Expedition and retain some or all of your acquired materials, depending on whether you escape at a campfire or in the midst of battle. Even death isn't a complete wash, as you'll still retain 30% of your spoils.

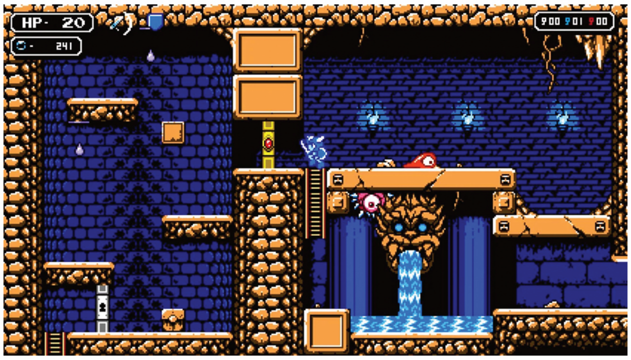
The remaining elements include city management, in the form of a Base Camp you can expand to earn permanent buffs; deck building, via a set of Landscape cards that alter the terrain during an Expedition; and idle gameplay, in the sense that you can set the controller down and let your Hero roam endlessly (or until they bite the big one). Because your adventure is more about planning a suitable loadout before embarking, then laying appropriate Landscape combinations to maximize gains and leaving the rest to chance, players are freed of the anxiety that comes with dwelling on combat strategies or executing precise button sequences with hairsbreadth timing.

This results in a title that can either be therapeutic or nail-biting depending on your approach. Do you cash out at a campfire early, or gamble your winnings by running one or two more laps around the track? Do you let the Hero run automatically, taking pleasure in the pure spectacle, or do you direct your full attention toward making an efficient material-harvesting Landscape arrangement?

Whatever your course, you'll require plenty of patience and luck. Grinding for materials is necessary for advancing the story, which means repeating Expeditions for hours on end. Even with all the preparations, there's a risk you won't be dealt an ideal hand or receive the choicest gear to ensure victory against a chapter's boss. And yet, it's a testament to how compelling Loop Hero's core gameplay "loop" is that you never feel punished by putting in the extra time as long as you're in the right headspace. **– TONY**

SWITCH
PUBLISHER: DEVOLVER DIGITAL
DEVELOPER: FOUR QUARTERS
RATING: T





Three Heroes, Eight Bits

ASTALON: TEARS OF THE EARTH

RETRO GAMES AIM to transport you to the past by convincing you that you're playing something from a different time. They're especially appealing to grown-ups who want to feel young again. But filling an old heart with nostalgia isn't a retro title's only job – it's also supposed to look, sound and feel good. Balancing the quirks and hallmarks of past eras with design choices that are genuinely fun, regardless of if you're wearing nostalgia goggles or not, can be a tough tightrope to walk. Astalon: Tears of the Earth walks the line much better than most, but you may not know that from the outside looking in.

The game is about three adventurers who are in a pact with Epimetheus, the lord of death. After all their health is gone, their deal with the dark side allows them to rewind time to the moment just before they perished. Then, in the twisted world of devoured souls, they can go shopping. This clever narrative take on the video game logic of "extra lives" makes each loss an opportunity to power-up. It's a good thing too, as this little troop will die a lot as they explore a giant castle, on a mission to save their town from poison magic.

Not surprisingly, each character has different skills. The warrior has a short-range sword swing that can cut through barriers, the rogue can shoot arrows and kick up walls and the magician has medium-range magic that can pass through walls. As they explore, they gain new powers, like the ability to dash, levitate and even summon familiars.

The three can expand their party as they go, inviting two additional adventurers to their ranks. One of them, a brown brawler named Bram, is a dead-on parody/tribute of Simon from Castlevania. He's a perfect fit for Astalon's Metroidvania structure, but you wouldn't know that, or anything else about Astalon, on first glance. Unlike Shovel Knight, which wears its influences and gameplay hooks on its sleeve from the start, Astalon is infinitely more coy.

Take the story for instance. It picks up at Episode 2, leaving you to wonder for the entirety of its 12-hour run time what exactly Episode 1 (which doesn't exist!) might be about. This brand of ambiguity is a big part of what makes Astalon feel like a genuine NES action-adventure from the '80s. But unlike Crystalis or Faxanadu, this mysterious high fantasy title doesn't have an intriguing physical box on shelves to entice players into giving it a try. (But a little bird told us that may change in 2022, so stay tuned.)

Astalon's quality is undeniable. Its character animation, puzzles and power-up progression are all top-notch, and the copious extras (like a mode where you play as one of the campaign's reoccurring bosses), all show that this was a labor of love. The plodding pace and tiny protagonists may be a turn-off to some, but with key art from Ryūsuke "Dragon Half" Mita, a surprisingly touching backstory to dig into and tons of secrets to unlock, Astalon is a memorable and meaty adventure.

But you'll only know that for sure once you play it yourself!

– JONATHAN

8.5

SWITCH
PUBLISHER: DANGEN ENT.
DEVELOPER: LABS WORKS
RATING: T

9.0
DUSK

Blasting Back to the '90s . . . and '80s!

DUSK & DUSK '82

PEOPLE'S UNDERSTANDING OF what a "retro" game looks like changes at least every 10 years.

When indie games first started getting big in 2010, retro meant 8-bit sprites and 2D platformers. A decade later, "Boomer Shooters" lead the way in redefining retro games. Lead among them is DUSK, a single-player FPS that pits you against a massive menagerie of frightful foes.

At first glance it might remind older folks of Quake, while kids are more likely to say, "It looks like Minecraft, but meaner." When you dig into it, though, DUSK is definitely its own thing.

Without a pre-existing audience or a big budget to sell itself with, the game relies on its deep empathy for fans of the genre. DUSK knows what people loved about '90s first-person shooters – both then and now, decades later, and it works to double down on everything that made them great.

Its earnestly lo-fi aesthetic has a real crunch to it. You won't feel bad for a moment when taking down a whole county full of cultists, creeps, cryptids and creatures. Not only do they look unreal, but they feel great to annihilate. Using chunky polygon guns to turn them into geometric mincemeat is nothing short of a treat.

So the surface-level hook is dumb fun, but DUSK's smarts are what really make it work. Every level is brilliantly paced and thoughtfully spaced to inspire on-the fly strategies to survive this wholly unfair onslaught of terror. Double-wielding shotguns, power-sliding into danger and later using medieval weapons like magic swords and mystical crossbows all allow you to turn the tables on your opponents in huge, surprising ways.

There are plenty of secrets to discover as well. A seemingly harmless bar of soap might be the thing your unclean enemies fear the most! But will it be enough to keep you from being corrupted yourself?

With a lengthy campaign, a score-attacking Endless Survival Mode and multiple difficulty levels to play with, DUSK has a lot of options to keep you going. But the best of them all is DUSK '82, a pre-order bonus that's also set to be released as a standalone eShop title soon!

Originally announced as an April Fools' joke, DUSK '82 turns back the clock to the dawn of PC action games. Unlike its big brother, it's a 2D, turn-based puzzle game, where every step counts as an individual move. Monsters won't walk until you do, allowing you to take the game at your own pace.

If that sounds too easy, don't worry – you'll need a keen mind and inventive spirit to get through each of the game's 30 stages. It's a brainteaser like no other.

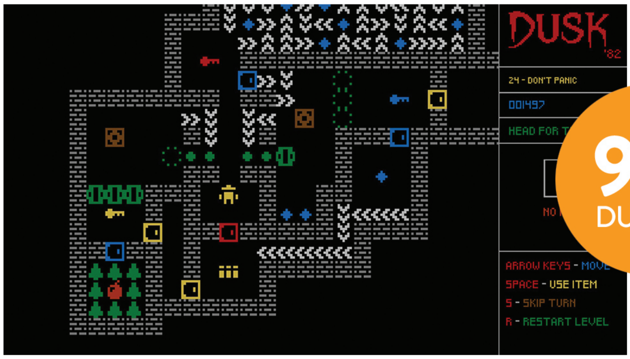
More importantly, it really feels like it fits alongside the FPS action of the primary DUSK. You'll need to consider how to use the environment to your advantage while eliminating your enemies in the same way, just with fewer animations and less in-your-face pressure.

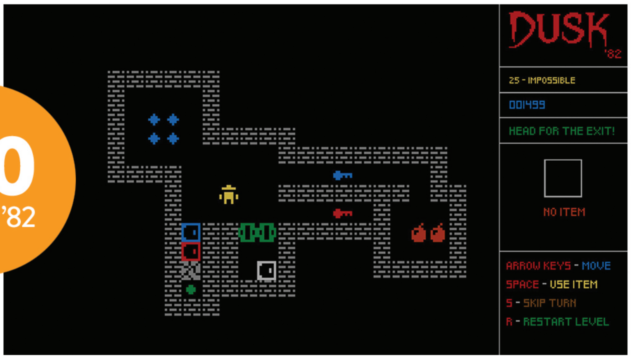
I was never a big PC gamer. I liked DOOM (the grandfather of Boomer Shooters) and Chip's Challenge (the primary influence of DUSK '82) just fine, but didn't ever get too attached to either of them.

But I love both these games. They find just the right balance between serious action and self-referential comedy. Light and dark, silly and scary, new and old; DUSK (and DUSK '82) love to play in the space that lies between the extremes.

– JONATHAN

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NEW BLOOD RATING: M





9.0
DUSK '82

It's Magically Delicious!

EPIC CHEF

HERE'S A GAME that checked *all* my boxes when I first heard about it. Strategy-based one-on-one duels? Check. Lots of cheeky humor? Check. Inspired by the work of the late great Sir Terry Pratchett? Check. Farming *and* business sim? Check and check. Cat people? Check again. Cooking? So zetta check! Epic Chef tosses all these in a pan with a pinch of secret seasoning, and the result is a delectable experience.

Meet Zest, who's thrown into the thick of things (quite literally) in the city of Ambrosia, the haute cuisine capital of Concordia. He's here to take ownership of the supposedly haunted villa outside of town, but as he awakens the next morning, he realizes he's stumbled into a bizarre world of cooking duels, where chefs face off for prestige and supremacy.

Victory or defeat depends on the levels of Spirit, Sophistication and Vigor that emerge when you toss a trio of ingredients into a pot and stir them up — but there are other factors at play as well, such as a chef's personal tastes and the use of sauces, the aftertastes of which can affect both you and your opponent. Making and eating food in your home's test kitchen, as well as doing activities around the farm and interacting with townsfolk, will raise your cooking level and unlock synergies between different ingredients.

Zest eventually becomes the owner of a restaurant, and managing it is mostly hands-off: You'll need to craft decor and add food to the menu, pay attention to customer reviews and takeout orders, and that's it. More time to challenge other chefs and experiment!

The best part? Thanks to the fact that Zest's new home is blessed with an abundance of magicka, crops and trees grow in a matter of hours. There's also tasty stuff to be fished and foraged, and you'll eventually be able to summon extraplanar livestock. (Unlike other farming sims, you can eventually lead them to the slaughterhouse for more ingredients.) It's darkly comedic, especially when you factor in who you bought the blueprints from.

The rest of the game is laugh-out-loud funny, with some mature humor that might go over the heads of younger players, but there's also a lot of philosophical discussions that Zest has with his new comrades and the people of Ambrosia — very Discworld-esque.

I encountered a lot of issues with the presentation, such as times when character models would duplicate and clip into each other (especially during Caturnalia), as well as missing dialogue in cutscenes. I also ended up having to reset once when I accidentally triggered one of the skill-building events at the same time that I tried to go fishing.

I would have liked being able to save my progress wherever and whenever, instead of at the end of every day. Also welcome would have been the option to see a city map at the press of a button, but that was absent as well. I did end up getting used to navigating, but many of the businesses you visit don't have the type of "flash" that sets them apart from other buildings.

None of those issues lessened my overall enjoyment of this banquet of a game, though! This is easily one of the most fun strategy/sim games I've played, and if you like British humor and/or imagining exactly what a Ghostato or Unicorn Bacon would taste like in real life, then add Epic Chef to your grocery list. It's magically delicious! **— REBECCA R.**

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: TEAM17
DEVELOPER: INFINIGON GAMES
RATING: E10+

Pick Your Path . . . in the Past!

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

AN EVEN LONGER time ago (in a galaxy far, far away), tales transpired that, so far, have never been seen on a cinema screen. Taking place over 4,000 years before the events of the Star Wars movies, Knights of the Old Republic tells a story that opened up an all-new era in the franchise when it was first released on Xbox and PC back in 2003. And it told that story so well that, since 2003, this game has gained a cult classic status and a reputation as one of the greatest Star Wars video games ever made!

One member of the chorus of voices singing this game's praises was yours truly, as I played KOTOR when it was brand new just over 18 years ago and absolutely adored it. So, when it was announced that Aspyr would be porting it to the Switch, I got myself hyped to relive this grand adventure a second time!

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ASPYR DEVELOPERS: BIOWARE & ASPYR RATING: T

. . . I, uh, probably shouldn't have let myself get *quite* so excited. I fully did not remember how clunky this game was, how limited its gameplay was and how empty its environments were! I was honestly shocked when I first sat down with it on Switch, as my memories of this adventure had me recalling a much more robust and varied quest. Again, I've encountered a reminder that memory is a funny thing.

Knights of the Old Republic is an RPG — but not really a video game RPG. Rather, it's a Dungeons & Dragons-inspired dice-rolling system with all the dice rolling and math hidden behind the scenes, as you only see a visualization of the action rendered with what are now fairly crude polygons and low-res textures. Combat looks like an action game, for instance, but every time you fire a blaster or take a swipe with a lightsaber, a hidden dice roll decides whether or not your attack connects.

The D&D-ness of it all is made apparent from the start, as you build a custom character to be this tale's protagonist and decide what class of character they'll be, and how many points to invest in Strength, Wisdom, Dexterity and the rest. Decision-making then carries forward through the whole adventure, as you get to choose from multiple dialogue options in conversations and pick how to approach most every situation that's thrown at you. If you behave altruistically, your character slowly shifts more to the Light side of the Force. If you're a total jerk or outright evil, your alignment will drift toward the Dark side — and your appearance will even change if you become too corrupted.

Getting to Choose Your Own Adventure your way through this tale is still engaging and fun, and the way the supporting cast of characters who tag along for the ride responds to your choices remains great too.

What's not so hot is the archaic presentation of it all. Again, this game is empty and visually dull in retrospect. It's basic corridors and boxy rooms with maybe one thing you can interact with at a time. NPCs are heavily recycled — I swear half the people you talk to are Twi'leks repeating the same half-dozen lines of Huttese as "voice acting."

What's worse is how unrefined the U.I. is — it's clear that this is just the old mobile port of KOTOR brought over to run on Switch with very little clean-up. A game with such a grand reputation deserves better than this bare-minimum approach of a port.

Aspyr has announced a full KOTOR remake is in the works, so if I were you, I'd hold off for that — and hope that it gets more love and care than this barebones port did. **— LUCAS**

7.5

Chaos Control

SHOVEL KNIGHT POCKET DUNGEON

TETRIS HAS JUST seven shapes to manage. Dr. Mario prescribes only six different types of pills. Shovel Knight Pocket Dungeon? It's got something like four dozen different varieties of enemies, terrain blocks, power-ups and traps all cascading into the playing field constantly, all at once. It's way too much.

This puzzle genre spin-off of the Shovel Knight series makes a poor first impression, as its "normal" level of difficulty is cranked up too high, and the game does far too little to explain itself to new players. I mean, I'm over three decades deep into serious video game playing at this point. I've played thousands of them. So if a new game is frustrating *me* right off the bat, sending me to the Game Over screen just a few levels in, then something's gone wrong.

I had trouble connecting with the core gameplay of Shovel Knight Pocket Dungeon in part, I think, because this wasn't a Shovel Knight game to begin with. The Yacht Club team took interest in a small indie puzzle project made by a developer named Vine, brought it under their umbrella and repopulated the whole thing with Shovel Knight characters. It helped my brain to understand that, primarily because this game is so fixated on forcing your hero to drink potions (something that never happened in Shovel Knight before).

And the reason for *that?* Potion-chugging restores your health, and your character needs to do that a lot, since every attack made against an enemy also does damage to you! It's an ever-present discouragement to keep you from just going wild and attacking every enemy you see. It's forcing you to strategize better.

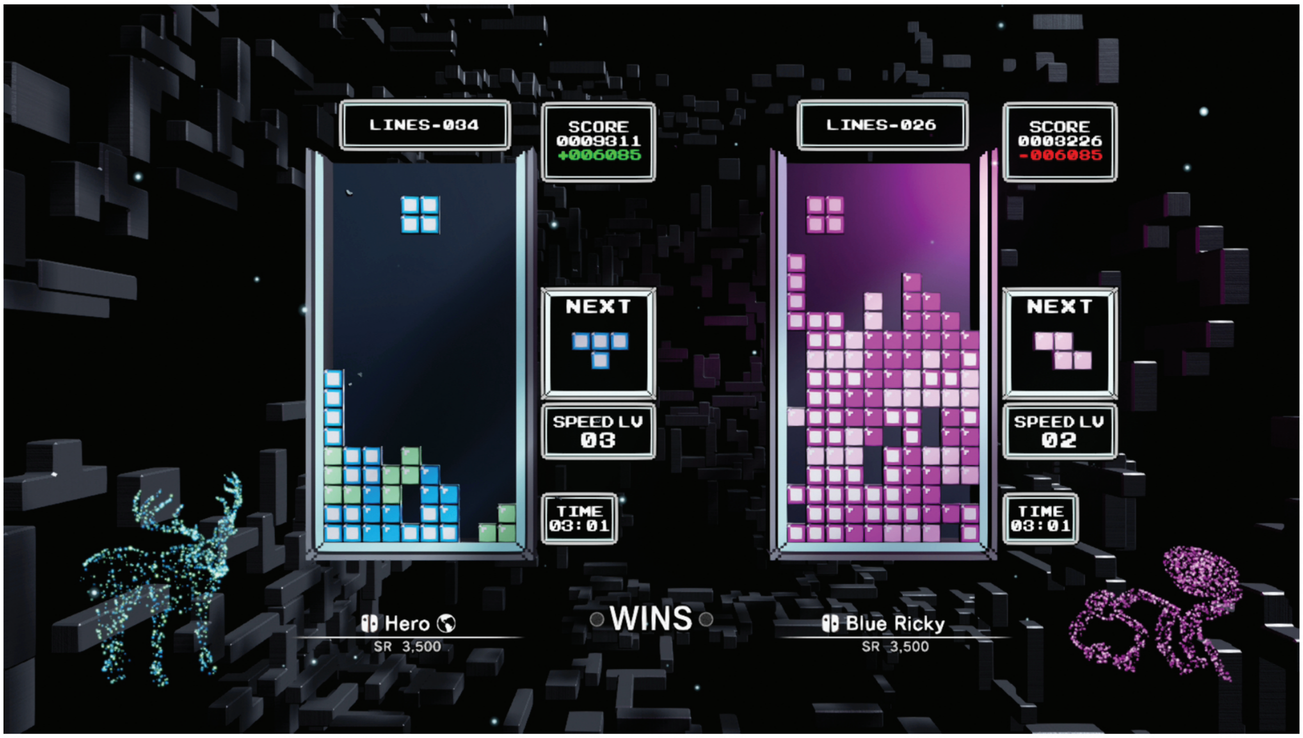
But again, I didn't get that right away. Pocket Dungeon takes a long while to "click" — and I worry that most players won't bother trying to complete the ascent up the severely steep learning curve. Thankfully, the options menu saves the whole thing!

Critical difficulty adjustments lie in the options menu, including buffs to your hero's health and attack power, as well as being able to slow down or even completely stop the constant onslaught of new playing pieces falling into the field. I stopped the flow entirely, making it so foes only moved when I moved, allowing me to totally take my time, study each situation and figure out how to approach it. This was key in me finally getting what the devs were going for here, as I was able to much more easily arrange enemies into groups, which lets you attack them all at the same time and save your preciously sparse HP.

An incredible Jake Kaufman OST, pristine pixel art and a canonical story that expands the Shovel Knight lore with new characters all encourage you to overcome these hardships. But if you dare to step inside the Pocket Dungeon, I'd recommend an extreme degree of caution and being prepared to dial the difficulty down right away. Learn the game under easier circumstances, then work your way back up to what the dev team presented as a "normal" level of challenge. (Because man, what a misstep that was.) **— LUCAS**

7.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: YACHT CLUB GAMES DEVELOPER: VINE RATING: E



A Masterpiece of the Past Made Futuristic

TETRIS EFFECT: CONNECTED

IN HIS 1994 article "This is Your Brain on Tetris," journalist Jeffrey Goldstein described how after playing Tetris for a week straight, he started to see Tetris everywhere. When he closed his eyes he'd see Tetriminos in the blackness, connecting with the woven mat on the floor. With his eyes open, he'd compulsively consider the world by Tetris standards, wondering how to fit cars and plants together. A later study at Harvard University dubbed this phenomenon "The Tetris Effect." They found that people who play 7+ hours of Tetris a day had a 60% chance of experiencing afterimages of the game.

Bringing you to that nearly hallucinogenic state is the primary goal of this latest iteration of the long-running series. You may not think you want yet another Tetris on Switch, but if you love to bliss out, then you may want to think again. While Tetris 99 is the ultimate group puzzle competition and Puyo Puyo Tetris is the pinnacle of breaking and remaking the core of the game, Tetris Effect is the ultimate dive into the Zen-inducing, meditative, therapeutic side of the franchise. This is Tetris at Burning Man.

Created by Tetsuya Mizuguchi, director of techno-psychedelic hits like Rez and Child of Eden, Tetris Effect is designed to be a full sensory experience. It looks how it sounds, and it sounds how it feels.

A stage that takes place underwater, filled with sea life made of stars, may reward you with the calming sound of bubbles glubbing up and popping each time you clear a line. Another may take place in the sky, where rustic wooden windmills embrace a strong, soothing breeze. Here, each time you connect the blocks, the satisfying clack of turning gears will ring out, sending signals to your subconscious that everything is coming together nicely.

This is the secret appeal of Tetris: It mimics a process that our brains are constantly working through. People are always integrating our experience of the present moment with our collected memories of the past, all while we anticipate what will happen in the near and far future. It's a lot of work! Tetris turns that work into play, and it's never been more satisfying.

From a gameplay perspective, the way Tetris Effect really makes this process a joy is by freezing time. After building enough meter, you can activate the "Zone" mechanic that allows you to instantly fill in any gaps in the field and clear a massive amount of lines in a short amount of time. It's an instant flow maker.

So that's where the "Effect" part of the name comes from. The "Connected" components come from the cross-platform multiplayer modes. There's a large variety to choose from, including a 3 Players Vs. CPU campaign mode with a massively wide playfield, a Classic Vs. mode that uses a remixed version of the graphics and music from Tetris on the NES, a spectator mode and more. Most of these modes can be played locally, though a few require a Switch Online account. It's a bummer that, unlike with Fortnite, you can't log on for free, but I guess that's life.

When it peaks, all of Tetris Effect: Connected's separate parts meld together and your mind melts away. It's the most feel-good, fully featured and fun version of Tetris to date. Get your brain on Tetris and feel the bliss! **— JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ENHANCE DEVELOPERS: MONSTARS, RESONAIR & STAGE GAMES RATING: E

9.5

Better (and Worse) than Before

NINTENDO 64 - NINTENDO SWITCH ONLINE

IF YOU'VE BEEN following the internet discourse surrounding N64 games on Switch, you may have heard that it's the single worst thing Nintendo has ever produced, featuring nothing but broken, bug-laden, barely functioning games. Obviously, most of what's been said about the service has been rather hyperbolic, but it's not completely without merit. The truth of the matter is Nintendo 64 - Nintendo Switch Online isn't terrible, but it isn't all that great either.

Since its announcement, there have been countless comparisons to previous generations' Virtual Console services, which have been hilariously over-romanticized of late, so let's clear up a few points. On the Wii, Nintendo 64 games cost $10 apiece, required a Pro Controller (sold separately) to play, and buttons could not be remapped. There were no suspend or save states of any kind, and the games all had a noticeably dimmed look to them.

Things improved a bit on Wii U, where button mapping was fully customizable with no additional controller purchases required, and we finally got save states, but accessing them was a frustratingly slow process. The visuals were still dim and a shocking amount of button lag was introduced, making precision jumps in Super Mario 64 or batting Ganondorf's magic back at him in Ocarina of Time nearly impossible.

By comparison, NSO N64 games have fixed the brightness problem, they feature four save states per game with no loading time and they have the same simple and effective presentation as the other NSO game libraries, which is great.

Now for the bad news. While all Nintendo 64 games are playable with a standard pair of Joy-Cons, the way the buttons are laid out can be a little confusing, and they can't be remapped. Memory Card saves don't work in the few games that supported them, meaning no ghost data in Mario Kart 64. The visuals are great at first glance, but several games have some strange bugs like missing fog effects. The button lag of the Wii U VC has been greatly improved, but is still noticeable, especially in games like Dr. Mario 64. The Rewind feature is also a no-show, which hits especially hard considering it *is* included with the Sega Genesis portion of the Expansion Pack.

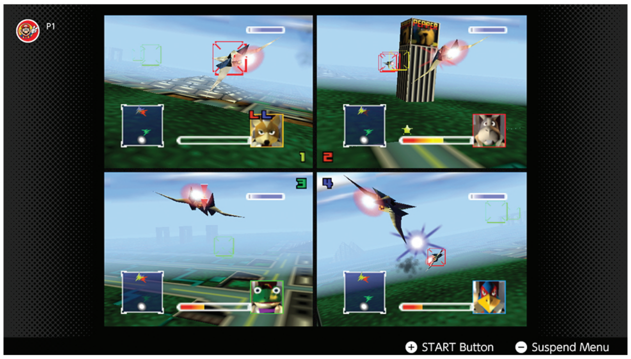
As expected, actual online play is as much of a mixed bag as it's always been. Sometimes it's fine – other times it's a laggy mess. It's serviceable at best, and unfortunately only goes to highlight the NSO Expansion Pack's biggest problem: value.

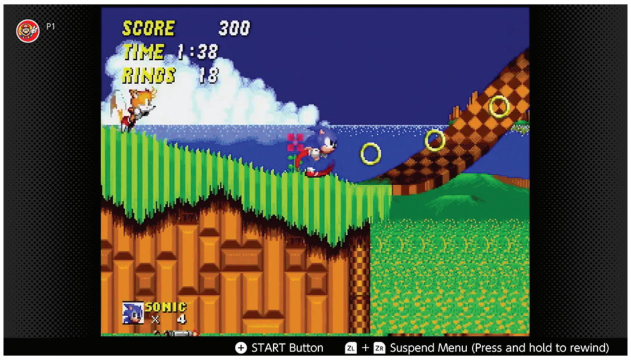
While the offerings of the base NSO package aren't perfect, their flaws were pretty easily excusable considering the price was a paltry $20 a year. The Expansion Pack more than doubles that, and while access to online play, the new Animal Crossing DLC, Tetris 99, Pac-Man 99 and an ever-expanding list of NES, Super NES, Nintendo 64 and Sega Genesis titles for $50 a year is still actually a pretty solid deal, when viewed next to the base NSO subscription, it starts to look way less good.

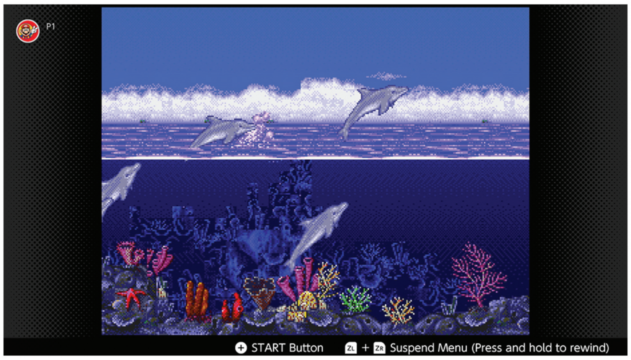
It's great to play Dr. Mario 64 on a modern platform, and some games like Star Fox 64 genuinely look and play great, but the problems with the service are too numerous to ignore. We'll have to wait and see if any of these issues get addressed in future updates, but as it stands right now this is a tough package to recommend. **– KRIS**

6.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: T







Nintendo Claims Ownership of Blast Processing

SEGA GENESIS - NINTENDO SWITCH ONLINE

CONFESSION TIME: I grew up in a Sega household during the 16-bit console wars and was a latecomer to the Nintendo family. Shocking, but true! That's why one of the most surreal moments of my life was receiving a brand-new Genesis controller in the mail with a Nintendo logo officially etched into the back.

This uncanny accessory arrives with the debut of another classic console added to the Nintendo Switch Online service: 1989's Sega Genesis. Unlike its contemporary counterpart apps for the NES and SNES, the Genesis is only available through the new, higher tier of NSO, just like the N64 app. The big question is, is this app worth paying for the $30 upgrade alone?

The short answer is . . . right now, not entirely?

Though we've already been promised additional games down the road, this app has launched with only a scant 14 games. However, the initial selection on display here shows a surprising literacy of the Genesis' eclectic library.

You'll only see a few of the usual suspects found in most retail compilations here – games like Sonic 2, Shinobi III and Golden Axe, to name a few – but the real surprises come in some of the console's brightest, and rarest, titles, including Contra Hard Corps, Castlevania Bloodlines, M.U.S.H.A. and Phantasy Star IV.

Players unfamiliar with the legacy of these games are in for a real treat, especially if their experience with Sega starts and ends with the original Sonic trilogy.

A few of these standout titles have been available in other, more robust compilations and the superb Sega Ages rereleases by the wizards at M2, but if you've skipped out on many of those and instead recently picked up a subscription for NSO, this is a nice bonus treat for what you may have been missing along the way.

Nintendo has outsourced a few previous retro ports to developer M2, known for loading up rereleases with a definitive menu of features, but it's not clear if they had much of a hand in these particular Genesis ports. The exact same features from the NES and SNES apps are present here: save states, online play, spectating and standard video modes.

Much like those apps, your performance online strongly depends on the connection of the two parties involved. A lack of additional features still feels somewhat barebones, but it also feels hard to complain when these games do run and sound extremely well, especially in Handheld Mode.

Nintendo has once again offered up replica controllers alongside the app. At a price of $50 on top of the new subscription costs, it's a hard ask for anyone but the most dedicated hardware collectors. While the feel is perfect, Western gamers can't help but feel left out when Japan received the option of the superior 6-Button controller with an improved D-Pad design.

The Genesis makes a welcome addition to NSO, but at launch, this app isn't quite a super strong selling point on its own. However, if you've skipped every Sega console and collection thus far and already have access to this app, what remains is a solid crash course in the hits of a fan-favorite system. (And diehard Nintendo soldiers, you can play this. It's allowed.) **– JOHN-CHARLES**

7.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: T

My Life as a Vacation Home Decorator

ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS – HAPPY HOME PARADISE

A LITTLE OVER a year and a half ago, I started my Animal Crossing: New Horizons journey on Strawberry Island, and since then, there's been a whole bunch of special events and diversions. Some of them were fun (Dream Addresses, summer fireworks, Halloween night, Turkey Day) while some of them were . . . meh (May Day). We've also gained the ability to fish for sea creatures under the ocean waves, an art gallery in the Museum and more storage – but fans were still clamoring for the missing pieces. Finally, our wishes were granted back in November, with Nintendo's final free update to New Horizons. But that was not all – we were also going back to work as interior decorators with the Happy Home Paradise paid DLC!

First things first: the free update. There's a handful of new and returning villagers that are making their first appearances, and if you were lucky enough to get your hands on the Series 5 amiibo cards, you've probably met a few of them already. (I've already moved Sasha onto my island!) Brewster and The Roost have finally set up shop in the Museum, so you can get your caffeine fix for 200 Bells. Unfortunately, while you're able to receive gifts from Brewster for being a frequent customer, you can't help him out with takeout orders behind the counter like you could in New Leaf. What you *can* do is use the amiibo phone to call characters for a coffee date, and you can hang out at the tables with friends that are visiting your island . . . but that's it. For something that was so eagerly awaited, it felt to me like kind of a letdown.

Another welcome addition is the expansion of Harv's Island, which I hardly ever visited aside from Cyrus and Reese's wedding photo event back when New Horizons first came out. You now can help Harv open an open-air market, which allows you not only to visit the wandering sales animals when they're not visiting your island, but you can also get your fortune told from Katrina and get your furniture recolored by Reece and Cyrus – they can change the whole color scheme above and beyond what you can do at your DIY bench! Getting all six vendors on Harv's Island up and running is pricey – 100,000 Bells *per site* – but if you've got the cash saved up, it's worth it. The only caveat is that the stock doesn't change daily.

There's also some new islands to visit, courtesy of another returning friend, Kapp'n. For 1,000 Nook Miles, he'll take you on a personal boat ride (complete with sea shanty accompaniment) to an uncharted island in a random season, which features new materials (like wild vegetables, vines and glowing moss), as well as Gyroid fragments.

I never was a big fan of the Gyroids, but these have gotten a new redesign to be a little rounder and cuter – you've probably seen videos of them interacting to music while making noise and dancing – and some of them are beginning to grow on me.

Speaking of growing, my favorite addition was the expansion of

DLC PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E

farming, along with the introduction of cooking! Recipes are obtained in the same ways as DIYs, but can also be inspired by catching various fish or sea creatures. While food can be eaten for an energy boost or given as gifts, there's a lot of missed opportunities – like cooking contests or potlucks – that I think could have been added to bolster the new options. Even the Turkey Day event didn't get a revamp because of the new update!

There are other QOL changes that have come over from Animal Crossing: New Leaf, such as the enactment of the same Ordinances you could enact as Mayor, and then one addition returning from the original Animal Crossing on the GameCube: the opportunity to do stretching exercises at the town plaza! You can even participate in them in real life by grabbing your Joy-Cons and holding them in your hands as you follow along with the on-screen instructions. (There are button controls available as well.)

Finally, on to the paid update! Since I was not a huge Genesis or Nintendo 64 fan, I opted to purchase the DLC by itself, and for $25, it was well worth the price. Happy Home Paradise is an updated version of the Nintendo 3DS' Animal Crossing: Happy Home Designer, turning it into a side job with lucrative pay. You can make partition walls and counters, expand the size of rooms, add a second floor, add soundscapes and design lots, as well as completely customize the look of the exterior.

Each villager you approach has a dream vacation home that they'd like to have, such as a beauty salon, a Japanese garden or a place filled with toilets (really?). Like in Happy Home Designer, there are also buildings on the island – a school, a hospital, a restaurant, a café and an apparel store – that can be designed inside and out as well. Even better, you can buy things and receive gifts from the villagers that get assigned to work at these places. Curiously, I found myself designing vacation homes for a couple of villagers that recently moved from my island, and they didn't even remember me or acknowledge me, which I would have liked to see. You also can't bring the full island experience back home with you: While you do eventually unlock the option to redecorate residents' houses, it's entirely limited to changing their exterior to one of the default "starter" houses, and rooms can't be enlarged.

My biggest gripe is how the menus for interior designing are laid out. The first menu page features the three required items for the villager's request, as well as other items that fit the theme of what you're designing. The tabs for wall decor, ceiling decor and clothing are self-explanatory, but the Housewares and Miscellaneous tabs . . . well, you better know the name of what you're looking for, because it's the only way you're going to find it, especially as your furniture catalog grows with each job you take *and* expands when you unlock all the items from the base game. If Animal Crossing had a menu system like The Sims, where items are separated by the room type (e.g. kitchen, bathroom, outside), or if the menu tabs were further broken down by item type, it would be so much easier and designing would go so much faster.

The big question: Is the DLC worth it? If you really liked Happy Home Designer, you'll be very happy with how Happy Home Paradise improves on its formula, especially after you've worked your way up the ranks. If you're not interested in interior decorating, the only things you'll be missing out on of any note would be the ability to craft room dividers and redecorating your neighbors' homes. Having been playing New Horizons since the beginning, it's a little bittersweet to know that this is probably the last time we'll be seeing content updates, but it's good that we've been given a whole new experience to stretch our creative muscles. – **REBECCA R.**

8.0

2022 YEAR IN PREVIEW

Due to a deluge of delays and early release announcements, we already know a lot about what to expect in the year ahead! Let's take stock of where things stand with the Switch schedule.

CHOCOBO GP

Featuring Final Fantasy's finest feathered friend!

LET'S TURN BACK the clock to 1999, the tail end of a generation during which many major publishers dipped their toes into the mascot kart racer genre. Of course, not every company had an instantly charismatic cast of cartoon crazies like Nintendo did – but that didn't mean they didn't try!

Even pre-Enix merger Square wanted in on the action! And what lovable scamp would headline their asphalt mayhem party? None other than the yellow-feathered mount from Final Fantasy, the Chocobo! Chocobo Racing for PlayStation pulled characters from the Chocobo Mystery Dungeon sub-series alongside guests from the mainline titles for a road romp that, while neither setting reviews nor sales charts aflame, still fostered a fervent fanbase of players who have been aching for a sequel over the past two decades.

One canceled chapter for 3DS later, the "Big Bird" in an adorable pair of jet-powered skates is finally returning in Chocobo GP for Switch! Along for the fun once more are Chocobo's longtime buddies Shirma the White Mage and Mog the Moogle, while joining them are new faces like Vivi from FFIX, the lightning Esper Ramuh and the omnipresent swordsman Gilgamesh. You'll be able to speed through such locales as the thieves' den Zozo from FFVI and the Gold Saucer amusement park from FFVII, as well as a new version of Cid's Test Track from the first Chocobo Racing.

From preview footage, GP seems to play more or less identically to its 32-bit predecessor. Racers can boost, drift and employ signature abilities on their way to victory, and get an edge on the competition by casting spells gained from Magic Eggs. These spells are sourced from the familiar list of Final Fantasy techniques such as Aero or Doom, and like in Diddy Kong Racing, collecting multiples of the same spell yields more potent results – so Fire becomes Fira which finally becomes Firaga, for example. This time, however, the action can go online, such as in a new 64-player tournament bracket mode! **– TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RELEASE: MARCH 10, 2022 RATING: RP

MARIO + RABBIDS SPARKS OF HOPE

The chaotic crossover continues!

AS A SURPRISE hit of 2017, Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle definitely warranted a sequel (and if you haven't played it yet, it is likely the most discounted Mario game in existence thanks to Ubisoft being in control of its price instead of Nintendo). Sparks of Hope introduces a Super Mario Galaxy-style adventure complete with Rabbidified Lumas and a Rosalina Rabbid! The release date still sits as a "2022 release," so there's no telling yet which part of 2022 will host the launch of this intergalactic voyage.

From the trailers we've seen so far, it will play somewhat differently. Exploration looks to be the same, having periodic areas where combat takes place — but by eschewing the grid-based confines of the original, combat looks more like a traditional 3D Mario game. Players have a range they can move around and perform in, and while the tactics of taking cover and attacking may still be in play, it all takes place in real time now.

It's hard to get a handle on how well this will work, as it was oftentimes helpful to slow things down and think about which moves would work best in the first game. Removing that will make things more exciting and fast-paced, but hopefully the consequences of that trade-off aren't too steep.

The titular Sparks are the Rabbid Lumas, each of which has an elemental ability. They may cast elemental magic in an affected area, which could be immensely helpful against the intimidating muscle-bound bruisers Mario and company will be facing.

An interesting new Rabbid with punk rock hair and what looks like a sword-like weapon has also been seen menacing the heroes, but the role of this new villain (?) is unknown.

Speaking of villains, the new main threat is named Cursa. We've seen this ghost squid woman — or whatever it is — taking the Sparks in and growing in power as they fall away, losing their, well, spark. Our heroes naturally won't stand for this, and they set off into the cosmos to make things right. Cursa also has the ability to make caustic goo that damages friends, foes and the various environs that you'll find yourself playing in, which are myriad.

Snow, beaches, castles, ruins and various other locales provide all players with interesting places to prove themselves to be worthy tacticians. It's somewhat of a blander showing than the last game's environments that focused on duality — like icy deserts and toy-filled gardens — but it's reminiscent of the level designs of Super Mario Galaxy, so I can't complain too much.

In some of the art that has been trickling out, we've seen Bowser again. He was integral to the plot of the first game, but it's uncertain where his place will be in this new adventure. He's played on both sides of conflicts in previous games when he's not the main villain, so we'll see what mischievous mayhem surrounds him this time.

We also haven't seen any of the Donkey Kong Adventure DLC characters yet, or Yoshi and Rabbid Yoshi for that matter — but it wouldn't be surprising to see any or all of them make an appearance.

The sky's the limit in terms of what could still be in store in this sequel! The first game was so wildly unbelievable in both its existence and its execution that it will be tough for a new entry to keep that pace, but the fact that this kooky crossover has fully turned into its own mini-franchise is as zany as it is welcome. **— BRETT**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MILAN
RELEASE: TBA 2022 RATING: E10+

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RELEASE: TBA 2022 RATING: RP

SPLATOON 3

Creatures from the past threaten Inkling culture in the future!

WITH SEQUELS TO Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle and The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild set to launch at some point in the year ahead, 2022 is shaping up to be a second coming of 2017. And reinforcing that perception further is another sequel to another 2017 release, Splatoon 2. Get yourself set for Splatoon 3!

That's as straightforward of a name as this sequel could possibly have, but don't let it fool you into thinking that this third installment in the ink-slingin' series won't offer anything new. Both multiplayer and single-player modes look remarkably different!

Let's talk about the single-player campaign first, because new information has come to light about it thanks to a fresh info dump from Nintendo. The quest this time around is going to be called "Return of the Mammalians" and feature some freakily fuzzy foes!

Take a look at that Octarian just below. Notice something weird about it? Yeah, octopi aren't supposed to have fur! For some reason, the previously slick-skinned aquatic enemies from the first two Splatoon games are now undergoing some kind of evolution that's making them take on some traits of mammals.

As a lore reminder, the Splatoon games take place in a far-flung future in which all mammals (and humans) have long since abandoned the Earth. The only warm-blooded creature left alive on the planet is Judd, the Turf War-judging cat! (And his young son/clone, Li'l Judd.) Every other lifeform is evolved from sea creatures: There are the Inklings, of course, who can shapeshift between squid and kid forms; the Octolings, their similarly morph-capable rivals; and various other sea species turned sentient, like jellyfish, shrimp and horseshoe crabs. (Often seen as shopkeepers.)

Now, however, it looks like the fur-covered species who once fled the planet are coming back from outer space, trying to restake their claim on their original home. Gameplay-wise this plays out both through the Octo enemies taking on fuzzy new forms, but also with large swaths of the landscape getting covered in "Fuzzy Ooze." It's a brown, gross-looking, pulsating substance that, if touched by the hero, will render them unable to move as their body gets covered in sticky fur!

Thankfully, hope isn't lost if that happens to you. Your tagalong buddy Smallfry, a little Salmonid who follows you throughout the single-player quest, is immune to the ooze! It can help you out by eating the fuzz to free you from being trapped by it, and probably will also help clear safe pathways forward . . . and maybe even attack Octarians directly as a combat assistant!

Speaking of combat, the core of the Splatoon experience will still be the multiplayer Turf Wars, which remain four-on-four online battles in which your team tries to ink more turf than your opponents. You'll get a whole new arsenal of weapons to use in that pursuit in Splatoon 3, including a Crab Tank that is a crustacean-shaped mech you can control; a new category of bows that shoot three arrows of ink at the same time; and the one I'm most excited to try, the Zipcaster, which temporarily transforms your Inkling into an ink-covered ninja with super stretchy arms!

There's so much more to dive into regarding Splatoon 3, so make sure to read the next edition of NF when we'll submerge ourselves even deeper into its new (oddly fuzzy) ooze! **— LUCAS**

BAYONETTA 3

First announced back in 2017, and now finally due to debut in 2022!

EVERYONE'S FAVORITE GUN-TOTING, bespectacled witch is finally returning. It's been a hot minute since Bayonetta 2 debuted on the Wii U all the way back in 2014, but the third entry in the series, Bayonetta 3, is set to release at last in 2022.

This series has proven to be something of a dark horse for Nintendo. Once upon a time, the original game, directed by Devil May Cry alum Hideki Kamiya, seemed so thoroughly un-Nintendo in design and execution that the thought of its sequel being a Wii U exclusive was preposterous.

A game about a gun-wielding, nearly naked witch with magic hair? Really, Nintendo?

At some point in the interim, though (probably largely influenced by her role in Smash Bros.) Bayonetta has come to symbolise the modern era of the Nintendo fanbase. There's something for everyone on the Switch, even if that means an M-for-Mature rating rather than the standard family-friendly Nintendo fare.

Having finally established herself as a familiar Nintendo face, Bayonetta could be forgiven for putting her feet up and coasting for a few games with a familiar formula that's already proven popular. Indeed, considering the rather neat-and-tidy conclusion to Bayonetta 2, there's always the danger that additional sequels might feel superfluous.

Thankfully, that doesn't seem to be the case, not least because of a dramatic shake-up in the core development team that ensures that this new game will be radically different from those that came before. This time around, the action is being directed by Yusuke Miyata, a newcomer to the Bayonetta franchise, but a familiar name to fans of the witch's extended world. Miyata was a designer on The Wonderful 101 – a game that featured Bayonetta as a guest character. More recently, Miyata worked on Astral Chain, proving that he definitely has the chops to head up a fast-paced action game filled with weird and wonderful monsters. (In fact, the September trailer that reintroduced Bayonetta 3 even included Astral Chain's Lappy the Police Dog!)

The enticing new gimmick for this latest Bayonetta game has everything to do with said monsters. Using her new Demon Slave ability, the titular player character can summon and control gigantic Infernal Demons in the midst of battle. Where previously performing such a summoning spell would effectively end a battle, this time around, Bayonetta can dash in-between the legs of two titans as they grapple with each other, commanding her summoned demon while also continuing to punish her opponent using her more traditional methods of firing bullets and slinging high kicks.

The result certainly looks spectacular in trailers – the perspective of seeing Bayonetta run around at ground level while two kaiju-sized demons battle overhead feels like a bizarre cross between a Gigantamax Pokémon battle and a Godzilla movie, and the result looks so fun and engaging that it's hard to believe there aren't more real-time action games that let you control a human and a giant at the same time.

While we'll have to wait a little longer to learn more about Bayonetta 3 and all of the game's delightful new quirks, from the initial trailer there's no doubt that this latest entry in the series is going to be worth the wait.
– MATTHEW L.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: PLATINUMGAMES
RELEASE: TBA 2022 RATING: RP

ATELIER SOPHIE 2: THE ALCHEMIST OF THE MYSTERIOUS DREAM

Brewing up an all-new adventure in February!

2022 MARKS THE 25th anniversary of the Atelier series, and Gust and Koei Tecmo will start the celebration early with Atelier Sophie 2: The Alchemist of the Mysterious Dream!

The game will arrive on February 25, and it will serve as a sequel to 2016's Atelier Sophie: The Alchemist of the Mysterious Book.

Atelier Sophie stars Sophie Neuenmuller as she learns alchemy in her hometown of Kirchen Bell with the help of a magical book. The book takes on a human form called Plachta, who becomes Sophie's mentor.

In the sequel, Sophie travels to the dream world of Erde Wiege; Plachta disappears, and a different character named Plachta appears who doesn't know Sophie.

Also, a new character, Ramizel Erlenmeyer, is an alchemist who looks like an older Sophie! Not confusing at all right? I'm interested to see how this all turns out.

Atelier Sophie 2 features the Panel Synthesis crafting system like the first game, where you organize ingredients based on color/element into rows and columns to make new items. A new Restricted Panel option will be available, which is tougher but reaps better rewards.

The game's turn-based combat system will have seamless battles after you attack monsters in the field, as well as new tag-team attacks called Dual Triggers.

If you'd like to play Atelier Sophie beforehand, the enhanced version is available on Switch, and it's also bundled in the Atelier Mysterious Trilogy Deluxe Pack with Atelier Firis and Atelier Lydie & Suelle. **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: KOEI TECMO
DEVELOPER: GUST
RELEASE: FEBRUARY 25, 2022 RATING: T

LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA

It hyperspaced right through 2021 and into 2022!

BACK ON OUR Forecast page in Issue #48, I bemoaned the fact that the release schedule for the end of 2020 was looking terribly thin (due to pandemic-related delays pushing tons of titles away from their originally intended release dates). The one bright light, at the time, was LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga, which was still locked in for an October 2020 debut.

Over a year later, we're still waiting to play it.

It turned out that The Skywalker Saga also got hit with a Covid delay at the last minute – and so severe a delay, in fact, that the entirety of 2021 will have come and gone (and then some!) by the time we finally get to revisit the LEGO version of the galaxy far, far away. Happily, it appears that the development team has been hard at work all this while, using the unexpected extra time to apply a ton of extra polish.

It's been so long that a complete reintroduction is in order! LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga will let players leap into scenes drawn from all nine of the core Star Wars films – so that's the original trilogy of A New Hope, The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi, then the prequel trilogy of The Phantom Menace, Attack of the Clones and Revenge of the Sith, and finally the sequel trilogy: The Force Awakens, The Last Jedi and The Rise of Skywalker. All but the last two of that list have previously been adapted into LEGO video game form, but this game isn't reusing any old levels from prior releases – every film has been approached with fresh eyes, so even if you've been playing LEGO Star Wars games since they first appeared in 2005, you'll get all-new gags to chuckle at here.

We'll have more to report soon – I hope! They delayed this release once; now I pray they won't alter the deal further. **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: WARNER BROS.
DEVELOPER: TT GAMES
RELEASE: SPRING 2022 RATING: RP

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SHREDDER'S REVENGE

The cowabungas got bumped back a bit.

WHEN WE FIRST made the call to grant the cover spot of Issue #54 to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge, it was because we thought we'd be playing it a few months later at the latest! Sadly, it got shell-shocked so severely that it fell out of 2021 entirely. Here's hoping that since the team was targeting a late 2021 release date originally, though, we won't have to venture too far into 2022 without getting to its real debut!

The last fresh news we got about this upcoming beat-'em-up was the confirmation that April O'Neil will be teaming up with the Turtles to kick some Foot butt on the battlefield. So speculation since has swirled around which character will be revealed as playable next, and for my money, it's got to be Master Splinter!

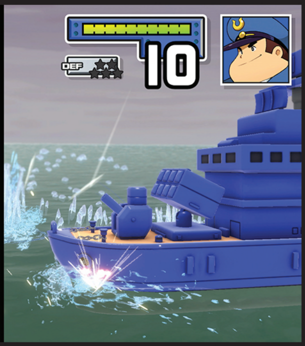
Splinter was seen in the game's announcement trailer in a fully animated action sequence in which he sped in circles around a sewer pipe, then busted a Mouser to bits with a well-placed strike of his walking stick. Why go to the trouble of animating that if Splinter will only end up as an unplayable NPC? Just as April's brief fighting scene in that same trailer proved to be a precursor to her playable status, I think Splinter must be up next. He could be a super speedy fighter, perhaps? (Also, with his rival the Rat King confirmed as a boss in the game, he's really got to make it in!)

Another cool gameplay tidbit we haven't noted before: team-up moves between two characters! Players will actually be able to interact directly with one another to activate tag-team attacks that aren't available to a lone fighter. One example is Leonardo giving April a boost, after which she blasts into Foot foes like a comet!

With luck, we won't have much longer to wait until Dotemu and Tribute Games reveal the final details and release date. Shredder will get his revenge soon! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DOTEMU
DEVELOPER: TRIBUTE GAMES
RELEASE: TBA 2022 RATING: RP

Alpha gameplay footage. TMNT: Shredder's Revenge is a game under development and may be subject to change.



ADVANCE WARS 1 + 2: RE-BOOT CAMP

A report from the front lines (of 20 years ago).

ALSO APPEARING ON an NF cover in 2021 but not appearing on store shelves until 2022: Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp! I wonder which of these two delayed titles will beat the other to market now?

Having to wait a little later to play Re-Boot Camp saddens me to a lesser degree than TMNT, since this game at least already exists in the form of its two original GBA versions. And, true to my word from the final page of our last issue, I did indeed take the delay as an opportunity to replay the main campaign from Advance Wars 1 by way of the Wii U Virtual Console!

I've played through the original story of Andy, Sami, Max and their time leading the troops of the Orange Star Army several times before, but I was still reminded of a few aspects of the campaign that I'd forgotten about.

For one, there are multiple paths to take through the war! A few missions set your CO for you, so those always play out the same way. But many missions give you a choice of which Commanding Officer you want to use, and Andy, Sami and Max all end up on different maps that are specifically set to test their unique skills. Max gives a big boost to the firepower of his direct-attacking units, for instance, so he's often faced with scenarios that make it difficult for him to just plow through enemy lines.

I was also reminded of how much of a slog the final mission is in the AW1 campaign! It's just a huge mess of units, and there's almost no way to play it efficiently. I'm hoping WayForward takes the opportunity to tweak some of those not-so-fun moments while bringing them to the Switch.

I expect to see the fog clear from Re-Boot Camp soon. Get ready to go to war! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: WAYFORWARD
RELEASE: SPRING 2022 RATING: E10+

KIRBY AND THE FORGOTTEN LAND

Nintendo's spherical hero finally takes on a 3D adventure!

SOME OF NINTENDO'S biggest stars wasted no time in making the jump into 3D, once they were afforded the opportunity. Mario leapt in feet-first at the launch of the Nintendo 64, while Link would take a little longer to arrive in style with one of the most beloved games of all time. Others were born into it, such as F-Zero's use of the Super Nintendo's Mode 7 effects and Star Fox with the Super FX Chip. And while it took just a little longer, Samus stepped into the third dimension too, primed and ready like she was born for it.

Then there's Kirby.

Kirby, as you may know, tends to take life at his own pace. As such, while others' journeys into a world of height, width and depth were full speed ahead with no looking back, Kirby's was more of a stroll, still smelling (and perhaps eating) the roses along the 2D roadway all the while.

That isn't to say Kirby was actively avoiding it or anything. His first 3D adventure came as more of a sport, as Kirby's Dream Course for the Super NES took on an isometric view as he swapped out puffing for putting in that golf-like title. Of course, while full of the adventurous, experimental spirit that Kirby would come to be known for over the years, it didn't quite provide the "true" Kirby experience fans had come to expect from the hero of Planet Popstar.

Kirby's second 3D experience was poised to be much like his first, as Kirby Bowl 64 (following the name Kirby's Dream Course carried in Japan) was frequently shown off alongside Super Mario 64 in the period leading up to the launch of the Nintendo 64. However, that would-be pop star from Popstar would not end up seeing release.

What *would* see release, though, was Kirby's first 3D adventure in a traditional style . . . sort of. But not quite.

Instead of celebrating the maiden voyage of the Nintendo 64 in 1996, Kirby would instead effectively see it off into the sunset in 2000 with the release of Kirby 64: The Crystal Shards, his one and only adventure (not counting Super Smash Bros.) on

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: HAL LABORATORY
RELEASE: SPRING 2022 RATING: E10+

the Fun Machine. However, while it looked like a duck and quacked like a duck – or rather, a 3D Kirby – the truth is that the tough cream puff was still basically confined to two dimensions in that loophole known as "2.5D," where you get all the visual appeal of a 3D title, but the gameplay remains confined to a 2D plane (camera tricks aside).

Between this early concept and late execution, there was one other Kirby title poised to puff our hero out into a full three dimensions: Kirby's Air Ride, a racing game shown off early in the Nintendo 64's life after Kirby Bowl 64 faded from memory, itself seeing a parade of status changes as it went through a long, slow development cycle before ultimately being cancelled.

Sort of.

The project would not only be resurrected, but carried through to release on the Nintendo GameCube in 2003 under the mildly modified title of Kirby Air Ride. Playing as Meta Knight, King Dedede or Kirby (naturally), players using the latter took control of a variety of gliding hover vehicles, ranging from Kirby's Warp Star to the Dragoon, which you may recognize as the machine you assemble in Super Smash Bros. for an instant K.O. It was also the last game in the franchise that Kirby creator Masahiro Sakurai would work on as part of HAL Laboratory.

As much fun and as beloved as Kirby Air Ride was – becoming a Player's Choice and a bestseller with 1,350,000 copies sold – it still didn't manage to scratch that 3D Kirby itch that fans had been longing for after seeing other Nintendo mainstays make the leap.

For years, Kirby would stick to the two-dimensional plane in one way or another. Handheld games through the Game Boy Advance era typically used pixel art, and when things shifted to the Nintendo DS and Wii, 2.5D was often (but not always) the way to go.

That didn't mean HAL Labs stopped poking at the idea of a traditional Kirby adventure in 3D, though. Over an 11-year period leading up to the release of Kirby: Return to Dream Land for the Wii, three different attempts at a new title for the GameCube had been made. One of these did, in fact, feature traditional Kirby gameplay in 3D; however, it would be cancelled by Nintendo for not reaching the level of quality they expected.

Nevertheless, HAL kept at it, and in 2016, it would seem they might have finally hit pay dirt. Kirby 3D Rumble was effectively Trojan Horsed to the public as a sub-game within the release of Kirby: Planet Robobot for the NIntendo 3DS. A simple affair, it had players control Kirby in a 3D style with his abilities to float, inhale enemies and copy their powers in an effort to defeat as many enemies as possible, as quickly as possible. 3D Rumble's three levels (split into 13 stages) would be expanded upon for the standalone digital release of Kirby's Blowout Blast and a full retail release of Kirby Battle Royale for the Nintendo 3DS the following year.

A style had been established, but there still wasn't quite a full 3D Kirby experience available to fans . . until now. (Or rather, this coming Spring.)

With Kirby and the Forgotten Land, Nintendo's tough cream puff will be taking on a full 3D adventure for the first time, inhaling enemies old and new as he challenges the "Beast Corps." Hmm, that sounds a lot like a certain fan-favorite Transformers franchise – will any of us be able to resist shouting "Kirby, Maximize!" after hearing that? I digress, though.

It's up to Kirby to figure out where he (and some of his buddies, the "Waddle Dee Report Corps") have wound up in this "New World," a place where nature and civilization have fused. Perhaps the mysterious cyan-colored creature with big ears and a tail spotted in the trailer and some art holds some clue?

It doesn't appear to be sandbox-style in the way of Super Mario 64 or Sunshine, nor open-world like Breath of the Wild. Rather, its goal-oriented stages seem to indicate something more along the lines of the Super Mario Galaxy or 3D Land/World titles. Whatever the particulars of its level arrangement and progression end up being, though, there's no denying that this is the most three-dimensional Kirby game ever!

Stay tuned, as we'll be exploring the setting of this game in-depth in our next issue! **– DAVID**

MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

Superhero strategy.

THE EARLY '90S were a dark and brooding time for the Marvel Universe. Murderous anti-heroes like Wolverine, Punisher and Ghost Rider became big names, totally eclipsing more colorful do-gooders like Captain America and Iron Man. In order to jump in on the trend, the Hulk even turned grey and joined the mob! Comics were trying to prove they were all grown up, and the easiest way to do that was to veer into the bad part of town.

This new embrace of the "family-unfriendly" content took a turn for the occult in 1992 with the formation of the Midnight Sons, a group of powered pals who walked in the shadows. Their first mission was to battle Lilith, the mother of all demons. Then, for years, their primary job was to battle the Marvel Zombies, preventing the virus from spreading across the world. Now, 20 years after their comics debut, they're set to appear in a turn-based strategy game!

This iteration of the group (now the "Suns" instead of "Sons," since it's not all men anymore) stars a customizable character called "The Hunter" who has ties to evil. She (or he) is joined by old alumni like Blade and Dr. Strange, plus new recruits like . . . Captain America and Iron Man? (Hey, I thought you two were too nice for a game like this?!) Seeing as the fate of the world is on the line, the two mainstream headliners are willing to suit up with an ever-growing cast of warriors and enter the underbelly of the Marvel mythos.

Gameplay is split between battling Lilith's unholy army and hanging out at The Abbey, your new headquarters. That's where you catch up on what the bad guys are up to, meditate, regroup and power up your team. It's a real outsiders' clubhouse, and unlike the original '90s iteration of this team, some of these heroes are pretty social, and dare I say it, even kind! Building relationships between party members is a key to unlocking new combination attacks, too.

Developed by the creators of the X-Com series, Marvel's Midnight Suns promises to be a "AAA" strategy experience. Turn-based strategy probably wouldn't be the first genre players would expect to see comic book superheroes connected to, so it's instantly an intriguing proposition. And with at least 13 playable characters, a hoard of in-game battle cards to collect and ample opportunity for expansion, chances are high that its first six months on the market will make or break its future.

In the '90s, I would have doubted the chances of a slow-paced, tactical game like this finding a big audience on a Nintendo console, but that was before Mario + Rabbids became a massive hit. But will kids and adults alike plop down top dollar for a sort-of scary, sort-of sweet Marvel crossover RPG? We'll find out in the second half of 2022! **— JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES
DEVELOPER: FIRAXIS GAMES
RELEASE: Q3/Q4 2022 RATING: RP

TRIANGLE STRATEGY

Which side will win in a war between three nations?

SINCE ITS ANNOUNCEMENT in early 2021, Square Enix's upcoming HD-2D strategy RPG Triangle Strategy has received some significant changes.

Its name is the exception. After debuting with a working title of Project Triangle Strategy, its name still sounds like a geometry formula. But perhaps it fits in some way? The game focuses on several aspects grouped in threes: your three main allies, three nations vying for power and resources and three ideals that will govern your choices in the game.

Maybe Triangle Strategy's name will make more sense once we play it in full, or perhaps it'll just join the likes of many other puzzling game names from Square Enix. (At least this one doesn't have any decimals or weird fractions like a certain one of their long-running franchises . . .)

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX
RELEASE: MARCH 4, 2022 RATING: T

In Triangle Strategy, you assume the role of Serenoa, the heir to House Wolffort in the Kingdom of Glenbrook. Your choices will shape the future of the continent of Norzelia, which includes Glenbrook, as well as the Duchy of Aesfrost and the Holy State of Hyzante. When the game begins, tensions run rampant among the nations due to a recent war.

Serenoa is joined by his fiancée Frederica Aesfrost, his childhood friend Prince Roland of Glenbrook and his advisor, Benedict Pascal. They set out to gather allies, engage in battle and make difficult decisions that embody the ideals of morality, liberty and utility.

Players got to get a taste of what Triangle Strategy has to offer with a demo that released after the game was announced. The developers then provided a survey, gathered feedback from around 250,000 players and made changes for the final release, according to a post from Nintendo Europe and producers Yasuaki Arai and Tomoya Asano.

Notable quality-of-life tweaks include faster loading times, adding skip and auto-play options for event cutscenes and allowing players to view conversation logs and rewatch events.

Most of the other changes deal with Triangle Strategy's turn-based battle system, in which you command a group of units in multi-tiered, grid-based battlefields. After playing the demo, I felt like this part of the game needed the most work.

During combat, it was hard to tell how your units' actions would affect enemies and the battlefield's environment. Not to mention the battles can get pretty long, which may or may not be appealing depending on the player.

The changes listed in Nintendo's post sound like they will address my issues and more!

The developers have also added Easy and Hard difficulties, a Battle Retry option and a way for players to pause and save during turns in battle. These additions alone make me more excited about the game, just because they respect the player's time and ability. Whether you enjoy a challenge or are playing the game mainly for its story, there's an option for you.

Other significant changes include increased camera control in combat, improved visibility for turn order and commands, weapon icons to help you distinguish enemy attack types and the addition of a simulation mode, which will help you see how your actions can affect enemies outside your attack range.

With its branching choices, tactical battles and colorful combo of 3D and pixelated graphics, Triangle Strategy is poised to be a standout Switch RPG in 2022. Plus, it's always nice to see developers taking player feedback into account before an official release. Hopefully that will prove to be a winning strategy for them! **— MAGGIE**

RUNE FACTORY 5

Cultivate crops and delve into dungeons with the rangers of Rigbarth!

AS WINTER MELTS into spring this year, Rune Factory 5 will let us live out our own small town farming dreams!

After being hit with a delay last year, this next entry in the popular simulation RPG series will release on March 22 on Nintendo Switch, almost a decade after 2013's Rune Factory 4 first arrived on 3DS. Rune Factory 5 launched in Japan last May, but this extra time may bode well for the Western release due to framerate issues reported by those who imported the Japanese version.

From what we've seen so far from XSEED and Marvelous, Rune Factory 5 looks to combine several series staples, with some big changes mixed in.

You still take on the role of an amnesiac protagonist and create a new life for yourself. This time, you can pick between main characters Ares or Alice and settle in the rural town of Rigbarth as you work to recover your memories and investigate strange happenings in the land. You also become a new member of an organization, SEED, that protects the town and its people from outside threats.

Rigbarth and the cast of Rune Factory 5 showcase one of its most notable changes: the visual upgrades. Rather than having a top-down perspective like previous entries, Rune Factory 5 offers an HD third-person viewpoint, making it look more like a modern JRPG. Its art style also adds to this change with bright, colorful characters, creatures and environments.

Gameplay features remain similar to previous entries. Combat offers an action RPG system, where you can pick between several weapon options, acquire allies to join you and face monsters in dungeons. A new addition to combat includes link attacks you can trigger with allies.

There are also slice-of-life elements galore! Rune Factory 5 features a new co-op cooking system, while returning activities include taming monsters, growing crops on your farm, crafting items, personalizing your home, attending festivals in town, fishing, competing in contests, making friends and, of course, finding romance among the townsfolk of Rigbarth and starting a family.

Some of the eligible marriage candidates in Rigbarth include Martin, the quiet blacksmith who secretly names his tools; Scarlett, a stoic and elite mercenary who's a member of SEED; Murakumo, the charismatic owner of Rigbarth's inn; and Lucy, a competitive young woman who can't resist challenging Ares/Alice to contests.

Rune Factory 5 is also the first entry in the series to feature same-sex marriage. Ares and Alice can marry any of the 12 bachelors and bachelorettes in Rigbarth, according to a September 2021 localization blog.

The Japanese version of the game didn't have this feature when it was released and received it in a patch in November, while the Western version will have it at release.

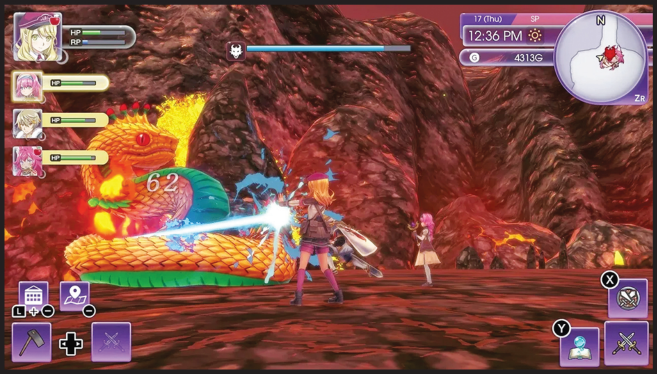
I think this combo of classic Rune Factory elements and enhanced visuals and systems will work well for Rune Factory 5, attracting fans old and new to try it out!

If you'd like to test out the series now, Rune Factory 4 Special, an enhanced version of the 2013 game, is available on Switch. (See NF Issue #46 for our review.)

Rune Factory 5 is available to preorder, and there are a few special options for dedicated fans including a Digital Deluxe Edition and the limited Earthmate Edition. The Earthmate Edition includes a physical copy of the game, a steelbook with art from series illustrator Minako Iwasaki, an art book with more than 70 pages of character illustrations and concept art, a soundtrack with 15 songs from the entire Rune Factory series and 13 costumes based on the marriage candidates from Rune Factory 4.

Will the shift in visual perspective help to shift more copies at retail, and more downloads from the eShop? We'll soon see! **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: MARVELOUS (XSEED) DEVELOPER: HAKAMA RELEASE: MARCH 22, 2022 RATING: T



RIVER CITY GIRLS 2
& RIVER CITY GIRLS ZERO
A headbutting double-header is heading our way!

2022 WILL BE a good year for fans of cute, violent schoolgirls, as the team at WayForward is bringing not one, but two new River City Girls games to the Switch!

OK, *technically* one of these games isn't actually all that new. River City Girls Zero originally debuted all the way back in 1994 on the Super Famicom, but was never localized outside of Japan. The game, a beloved entry in the Kunio-kun series, first introduced Misako and Kyoko, who, unlike previous female characters in the series, are more than capable of looking after themselves in a fight.

In 2019, spin-off River City Girls brought Misako and Kyoko back into prominence in the West. Now, the WayForward crew is making good use of the series' back catalog by finally giving the Super Famicom title a chance to wow English-speaking fans.

River City Girls Zero serves as a prequel of sorts to the 2019 game, and has even been given a facelift, with an all-new anime intro and new manga-inspired cutscenes that match the presentation of the first River City Girls. What's more, there's a brand-new theme song, provided by River City Girls composer Megan McDuffee, making this old game feel fresh all over again.

This would be more than enough to get River City Girls fans excited, but it's not all that WayForward is currently working on. A full-blown sequel, River City Girls 2, is also in the works, taking the series further than ever before.

This time around the game will see an expanded roster of playable characters. All four fighters from the first River City Girls – Misako, Kyoko, Kunio and Riki – are returning, but the developers have also taken the opportunity to bring back some iconic characters from other games in the long-running series. Specifically, we'll be getting Provie (first playable in 2017's River City Ransom: Underground) and Marian, who started life as a damsel in distress in the original Double Dragon before developing into a noteworthy martial artist in her own right.

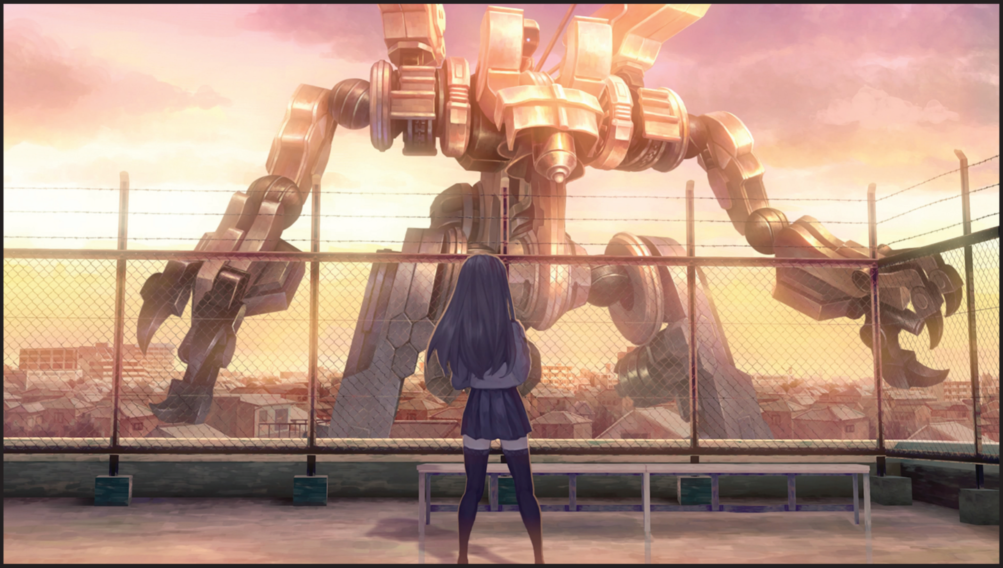
These two new playable characters show just how far WayForward is willing to dive into the franchise's expanded universe. It's likely that we'll see a variety of additional Easter eggs and references to a whole host of games in both the Kunio-kun and Double Dragon franchises.

Release dates are unpredictable across the board at present, so it's unclear exactly when these games will drop. At the time of this writing, River City Girls Zero is tentatively scheduled to launch in the next few months, while River City Girls 2 should be available midway through 2022.

What's more, Limited Run Games has promised that both the River City Girls prequel and sequel will receive fancy physical editions – no doubt packed with nifty merchandise! Both will be sold separately, but there's also a chance that Limited Run might do fans a favor and provide a bundle that features both games together.

That's a lot for fans of cutesy, colorful beat-'em-ups to get excited about, as the River City franchise dives deep into its history while also looking toward the future! **– MATTHEW L.**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: WAYFORWARD RELEASE: TBA 2022 RATING: RP



SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: VANILLAWARE
RELEASE: APRIL 12, 2022 RATING: T

13 SENTINELS: AEGIS RIM

The PS4 sleeper hit of 2020 hits the Switch in 2022.

CAN YOU HEAR that humming sound?

No, it's not a bunch of giant robots activating before battle. No, it's not a host of kaiju ravaging the planet.

It's the collective excitement from the news that Vanillaware's sci-fi adventure game 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim is coming to Nintendo Switch on April 12! It was initially released on PlayStation 4 in 2019 in Japan, then worldwide in 2020.

Fans of the game, myself included, celebrated the port announcement for two main reasons. One, it gives us a chance to play the game again and do so portably, but more importantly, it will allow more people to experience this gem for the first time.

13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim tells the story of 13 high school students who must defend humanity by piloting giant robots called sentinels and discover the truth behind the invading kaiju monsters. If that plot description sounds a bit vague, it's supposed to be! You should go into this story knowing as little as possible because it's excellent and crazy and will probably cause smoke to come out of your ears.

13 Sentinels features two types of gameplay elements to weave this tale, and you don't see them paired together too often: It's part 2D side-scrolling adventure and part real-time strategy combat. It's an unusual combo! I thought the same thing when I played this game last year. However, I was surprised at how well they work together, and that's due in part to how much flexibility the game offers you.

You can jump between combat, story and the game's built-in glossary (which becomes a necessity fairly quickly) in the main menu, and you have some agency in how you view the story as a whole.

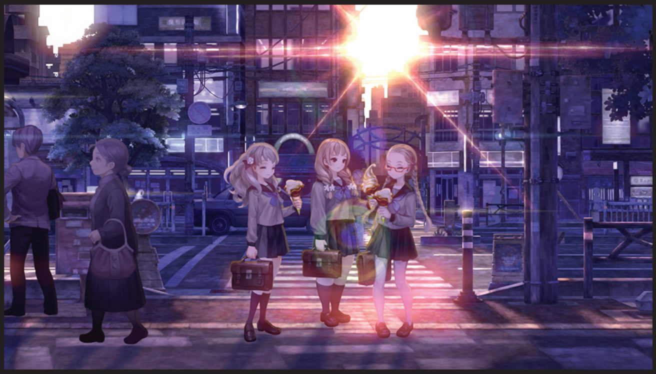
In the sidescrolling adventure segments, you experience the narrative through the eyes of the 13 protagonists in beautiful hand-painted environments. Some include Juro Kurabe, a sci-fi fan who's been having unsettling dreams; Ei Sekigahara, a young man who's lost his memory; and Ryoko Shinonome, a student plagued with headaches who's searching for a prisoner.

Each protagonist has a branching storyline. You have to complete them all to get the full picture, but you can switch between characters often, which provides an interesting way to see the tale play out nonlinearly.

In the real-time strategy battles, you control six characters in their sentinels and defend a terminal against waves of kaiju. There are four types of sentinels with strengths and weaknesses. First-generation sentinels can deal great damage up close, while fourth-generation sentinels can fly and get to enemies quickly.

The combat scenarios do make me wonder about how this game will perform on Switch. The later battles include many enemies and attacks on the screen, and my PS4 Pro struggled. Also, the combat could be tough to see in Handheld Mode.

We'll have to wait and see how the Switch port performs, but if you're a sci-fi fan, don't wait on considering this game for your 2022 list. I'm confident it's unlike most of what you've played before! **— MAGGIE**



SONIC FRONTIERS

The heroic hedgehog hurls himself headfirst into an all-new open world!

AS WITH MANY a Sonic title, it all started with rumors — rumors of a game called "Sonic Rangers," said to be an open-world Sonic the Hedgehog experience. These rumors seemed to be validated when Sega unveiled a trailer at the end of the 30th anniversary livestream back in May; while the game went unnamed, the trailer's metadata and a press release would confirm the name for the upcoming release.

That is, until more buzz came about as Sega registered a trademark and website for a different name: "Sonic Frontiers." It wasn't long until other teases came, hinting that Blue Blur fans would want to tune in to 2021's Game Awards on December 9.

Earlier in the night, we were blown away by a new trailer for the movie Sonic the Hedgehog 2. Later, we would get another trailer that followed on from the teaser earlier in the year, answering some questions but raising many more.

Sonic Frontiers, as the game is now officially called, is described by Sega and Sonic Team as an "open-zone-inspired experience" — perhaps as a nod to Sonic's use of "zones" to designate stages as opposed to Mario's numerous "worlds." Shots of a number of different landscapes were shown throughout the trailer, including cliffs, oceans, mountains, waterfalls, towers, bridges, monuments and flowery fields. These would be supplemented by talk of dense forests and deserts on the official website.

Before the quick guided tour, Sonic is being chased through a forest by something tunneling underground. A voice (identified as Amy Rose's from trailer subtitles) calls out to Sonic, and he makes a sharp left while being tracked by some glowing rock-like missiles that explode behind him, seemingly embuing him with some sort of new power that emits pinkish pixel-like particles around him as he runs even faster than before. He stops short of speeding off a cliff, and turns around, only to be confronted by a mysterious enemy so large, it can only be described as a titan.

This adventure takes place in a region known as the Starfall Islands, and is brought to us by Sonic Team, led by Morio Kishimoto — director of Sonic Colors, Sonic Lost World and Sonic Forces. (A bit of an uneven list, to be sure.)

Fortunately, he's not the only name attached to it. The duo of Ken Pontac and Warren Graff have been writing for the series since Sonic Colors in 2010 (otherwise best known for their work on Happy Tree Friends), bringing us such meme-orable moments as "Baldy McNosehair" and "None of this is good, Vector. That's why it's called 'war.'" But now, a new face is taking the reins as we head out into this wild new frontier. Rather, a new face for the games, but one all too familiar to longtime fans of the franchise!

Penning the narrative for Sonic Frontiers is none other than Ian Flynn, the lead writer for the bulk of the latter part of Archie's Sonic the Hedgehog run, as well as IDW's Sonic comics, two episodes of the Sonic Boom cartoon, as well as the entirety of Archie's Mega Man comic, among other projects.

It's an interesting mix with great potential, and one we'll be keeping an eye on as it heads toward its Holiday 2022 release! **— DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SONIC TEAM
RELEASE: HOLIDAY 2022 RATING: RP

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD 2

Leaping into a New Year that's promised to bring us a new Zelda!

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RELEASE: TBA 2022 RATING: RP

THE UPCOMING GAMES filling the last dozen pages would be more than enough to guarantee that Switch fans have an incredible 2022. And more games not yet revealed will bolster that already amazing lineup even further, leaving no doubt that the next dozen months will be some of the best the Switch has ever seen.

But there's one game that's really going to put 2022 over the top: the sequel to The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild!

It's hard to believe, but Breath of the Wild is about to turn five years old. It's hitting the half-a-decade mark on March 3, the date that will also be the five-year anniversary of the Nintendo Switch hardware. Time flies when you're having fun, doesn't it? It doesn't seem like it's really been that long since we were living in the Wii U era, but sure enough we've been Switchin' things up since 2017.

That span of time is important, too, because it means that work on this next Zelda adventure has been going on for nearly as long! I'm sure the dev team took a break for a while after Breath of the Wild went gold, but it wouldn't be wrong to count Breath of the Wild 2 as being five full years deep into development either.

Five years! And the team didn't have to start from scratch this time, since this sequel is set in the same Hyrule as before, with the same Link and the same Zelda. Maybe a year or two later, storyline-wise. But having all of the existing assets and world design of Breath of the Wild already in place surely meant the developers were able to leapfrog past a few of the early steps they otherwise would've had if they'd started from a blank slate.

The possibilities of what the team could have accomplished given that much time and that much of a head-start are mind-boggling! Granted, this stretch of five years has also included the coronavirus pandemic, which we know hit Nintendo hard and surely caused delays behind the scenes for this game in particular. But enough time has passed now that Nintendo's teams must have adapted to the new normal, and they declared that 2022 would be when this game would see release at the end of its E3 2021 trailer – so I'm going to believe them.

What does that mean for the year ahead? Well, expect to see a major marketing push!

I'd predict that the next time we see this game in action, we'll finally get its official name. Nintendo's representatives have said that the name has been held back since it will reveal the focus of the adventure . . . but they have to share it at some point! I don't see how they could do another trailer and not give us that much – Breath of the Wild was given its name roughly nine months before release, so this one has to be coming soon.

I think we're also due for a further explanation of Link's plight and the goal of his new quest. What exactly is the deal with his corrupted right arm? Is Zelda out of the picture entirely, or will she actually play a role in the adventure this time beyond just being a voice in Link's head? And is Link ever planning to get a haircut?

Expect answers to arrive alongside more questions in the months ahead, then join me in praying that no extra delays befall this project and the Big N can actually make good on their big promise to deliver this new Zelda here in 2022! **— LUCAS**

A *very* long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...

BY MATTHEW LOFFHAGEN

The Path to the Past

THE FUTURE LOOKS bright for Nintendo Switch fans heading into 2022, as that jam-packed Year in Preview should have everyone eagerly awaiting the hits that are on the horizon. Before turning our attentions entirely to tomorrow, though, we first need to reflect on yesterday! Or yesteryear . . . yestercentury, perhaps?

The first big Nintendo Switch release of 2022 is set to be the all-new Pokémon Legends: Arceus, and it's uniquely positioned to move the mega-popular monster-catching series into the future by bringing players back to the past! Up until now, all of the Pokémon games ever released have taken place in the present — a world roughly equivalent to our own in terms of time and technology, but just with the addition of roaming monsters that can be caught, befriended and trained for battle!

Not Pokémon Legends: Arceus, though. That map may look like the Sinnoh region we first saw in Diamond & Pearl years ago, but it's actually the Hisui region: the wild and untamed Sinnoh of generations ago! You are a young explorer and one of the first humans to set foot in this wilderness, and it's up to you to write the first-ever Pokédex chronicling all the different species to be found here! So, are you up to the task? Read on and we'll do our best to prepare you before you set out to walk The Path to the Past!

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

Exploration

Venturing into the wilderness of the Hisui region!

GET READY TO step into the widest world the Pokémon series has ever seen! The Hisui region offers vast open spaces teeming with wild, roaming Pokémon creatures to discover – and beautiful vistas to behold!

The Pokémon series has ben building toward more open exploration for a few years now. In Pokémon Sword & Shield, most of the game world was built out of traditional, linear routes that didn't offer much freedom – but in the middle of the Galar region was the Wild Area, a larger open zone with a freely controllable camera and Pokémon that appeared visibly moving around (not just hiding unseen in tall grass). The Wild Area concept was expanded upon further through Sword & Shield's two DLC expansions, The Isle of Armor and The Crown Tundra. They offered even more detailed and visually varied areas to explore in any direction that players chose!

Now, Pokémon Legends: Arceus takes the next step. It isn't quite getting to the Breath of the Wild level of open-world exploration, as you won't be able to travel the entire Hisui land mass in one go. Rather, the region has been divided into five big chunks, each one of which is roughly twice as large as Sword & Shield's Wild Area was! That's more than enough square mileage to satisfy eager explorers, I'm sure.

What will make exploration even more fun is that you won't have to do it all by foot! Pokémon Legends: Arceus is also bringing in several Pokémon that will offer you travel assistance, like the Hisuian Braviary who'll take you soaring through the sky and big Basculegions that will ferry you across waterways. Enjoying the great outdoors of Hisui will be a highlight for sure!

Home Base

Rest and recuperate in Jubilife Village.

WHILE MOST OF the Hisui region is unsettled by humans at the time when Pokémon Legends: Arceus takes place, there is one important outpost that will serve as your springboard to adventure: the humble and wholesome Jubilife Village! Decades further in the future it will become Sinnoh's Jubilife City, but for now it's just getting started.

Jubilife Village will serve as the hub of your quests, since it's where the Galaxy Expedition Team is based! You'll become a member of the Survey Corps charged with charting the region and its Pokémon population, and you'll embark on missions from headquarters, then report back with your findings when you're through.

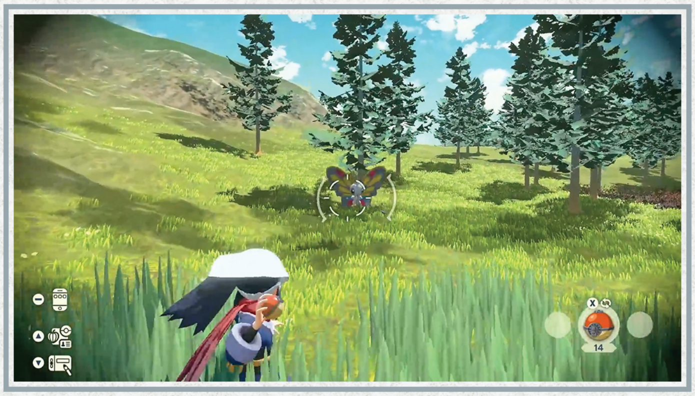
The village will also be the place where you'll trade Pokémon with other Trainers, change up your look using the optional alternate attire you'll acquire, chat with important NPCs and more! Think of it as your Hisuian home sweet home.

Pick a Partner

Which one will join you on your journey?

YOU CAN'T VERY well venture out into the wild without a first partner Pokémon by your side, and a trio we've never seen before has been assembled for you to choose from. First hailing from Generation II, it's the Fire-type Cyndaquil. The Grass-type Rowlet is making an encore appearance from Gen VII's Alola region, and rounding out the bunch is Generation V's Water starter, Oshawott.

Why have these three been picked in particular? Fan speculation has it that their final forms are the most thematically appropriate for the feudal Japan-inspired Hisui region: the warlord-like Typhlosion, the forest-dwelling archer Decidueye and the samurai warrior Samurott all fit in well in the past. But will these three actually evolve into those same old forms we've seen before, now that they're in a new environment, a new part of the timeline and headling a new game? Rumor has it that each one might discover a different path to progress . . .



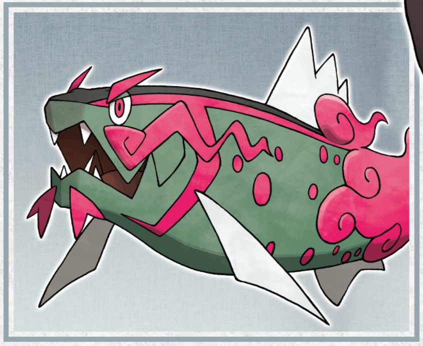
Catch 'em All!

You've got a lot of assignments ahead of you.

THE POKÉMON SERIES' original commercial tagline (and theme song) of "Gotta Catch 'em All!" has been slowly de-emphasized over the decades, but that old-school goal is once again stepping into the spotlight for this old-timey adventure. This is a world with no Professor Oak! No electronic Pokédexes, no elaborate computer systems or generations' worth of study of each Pokémon species. This game takes place in a time when humankind really didn't fully know what to expect when attempting to inhabit new parts of their planet. So somebody's got to go find out! (That's you.)

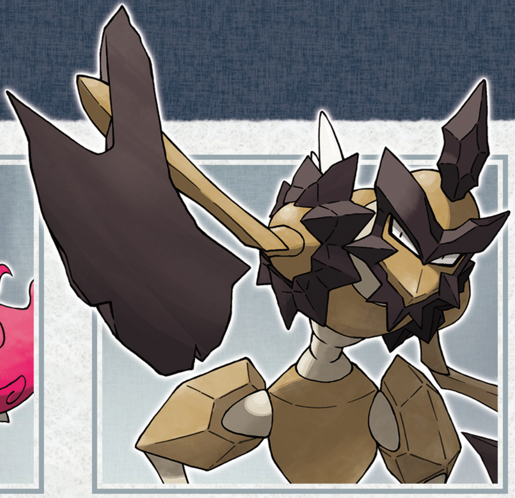
The process of catching Pokémon is a whole new ballgame in Pokémon Legends: Arceus. As in past titles, you can go through the usual routine of battling a wild monster with one of your own team members, weakening it and then throwing a Poké Ball just before it's about to faint. But that method is secondary to the new emphasis of this adventure: stealth. You know how the old games always started out with a warning to beware of wild Pokémon lurking in tall grass? Well now the tables have turned, because you get to crouch, creep and crawl your way through the grass yourself in order to sneak up on unsuspecting Pokémon roaming around in the wild, then bam! Toss a surprise Poké Ball at them and catch 'em with no battle needed.

If that seems like it would be too easy, don't worry — just catching one of each species won't be enough to satisfy your Galaxy Team boss. You'll get a whole list of specialized assignments to complete in order to write the most robust first-ever Pokédex possible!



Basculegion

Remember Basculin? The somewhat forgettable fish from Unova is getting a recognition boost in Hisui, as the Basculin of this region are able to evolve into this intimidating Water/Ghost-type that will give you rides!



Kleavor

An all-new alternate evolution for Scyther is here! Rather than becoming the metal-encased Scizor when evolving, the Scythers of Hisui transform into this big, brutal Bug/Rock-type with a unique move: Stone Axe!

Wyrdeer

Stantler has been an unevolving Normal-type since Generation II, but it's finally been revisited and given this all-new evolution in Hisui! Wyrdeer is a Normal/Psychic-type that has a better white beard than Santa.

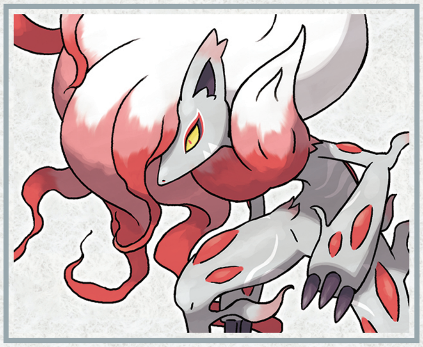
NEW POKÉMON!

. . . or are they old Pokémon?

THE POKÉMON COMPANY held back from including any new creatures in Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl, but the floodgates have opened for Pokémon Legends: Arceus! While most of the monsters you'll meet are from the same set seen in modern Sinnoh, it turns out that traveling to the past of the same region is all it takes to uncover some fresh faces. There are some all-new Pokémon here that have evolved from previously seen species, as well as regional variants unique to Hisui. And the set of eight seen here are just the beginning – expect to encounter more new Pokémon as you explore Hisui yourself!

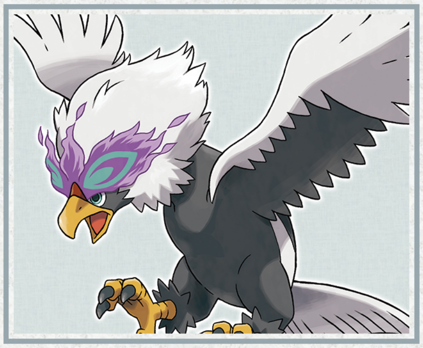
Hisuian Zorua

There aren't many never-used type combinations left, but Zorua's new Hisuian form is laying claim to one of the few remaining ones: Normal/Ghost! That means it's also immune to both Normal and Ghost attacks.



Hisuian Zoroark

Like its pre-evolved form, Hisuian Zoroark is also part Normal and part Ghost. No word yet on if this pair of tricksters will still impersonate other Pokémon as they did back in Gen V. Maybe they've got an all-new trick!



Hisuian Braviary

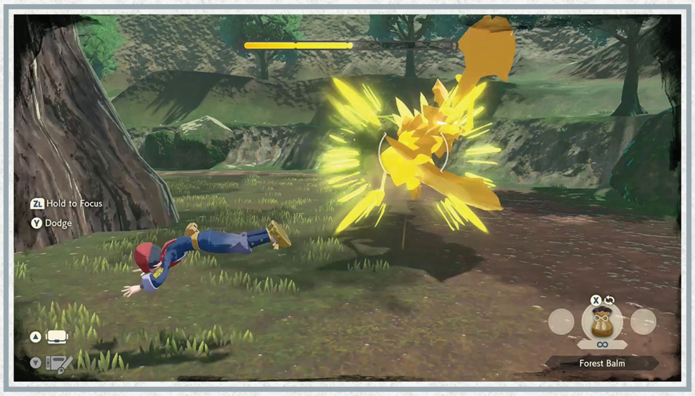
While Zorua and Zoroark have gained the Normal type in Hisui, Braviary has traded its out in order to become a Psychic/Flying transport unit. You'll get to hang glide around Hisui with the help of this bird of prey!

Hisuian Growlithe

"Who's a good doggie? You are! That's right, you are!" . . . Just, uh, just getting myself ready for the moment when I first come across this cutie in the Hisui region! It's 50% Fire, 50% Rock and 100% fluffy cuddliness.

Hisuian Voltorb

Finally, say farewell to the ever-irritated Electric-only Voltorbs of past games and say hello to the all-new, all-cheerful Electric/Grass version! (Though it gets *so* happy that it often explodes from sheer joy, it seems!)



BATTLE STYLES

This time, the Pokémon are attacking you!

COMBAT IS GETTING a lot more complicated!

There are a few major changes to Pokémon battles in the Hisui region — the first being that not every battle is between two Pokémon! Sometimes a wild monster will pick a fight with your player character directly, launching attacks that can hit and harm you! Yes, not every creature will take kindly to you sneaking around in the shadows and trying to catch them without their consideration, and they'll let you know their opinion in the form of a quick Thunderbolt to the face!

Taking on opponents in these Man vs. 'Mon showdowns is the focus of a new kind of gameplay sequence: calming Frenzied Pokémon! Pokémon in a Frenzy glow with rage and constantly unleash attacks, and it's up to you to abate their anger with Balms (soothing packets of their favorite foods). If you duck, dodge and dive out of the way of their rampage long enough to quiet their heightened emotional state, you'll then have a chance to fight them traditionally, using one of your own Pokémon.

But even traditional battles have gotten a tweak in Pokémon Legends: Arceus! You can now choose to unleash attacks using Strong Style, which will add more power, or Agile Style, which is weaker but goes out fast. The relative speeds of two Pokémon opponents are more important than ever, because unlike the back-and-forth battles of the past, Pokémon who are exceptionally speedy in the Hisui region can sometimes attack more than once before their foe has a chance to respond!

. . . I might actually let my team members learn Agility now. Huh.

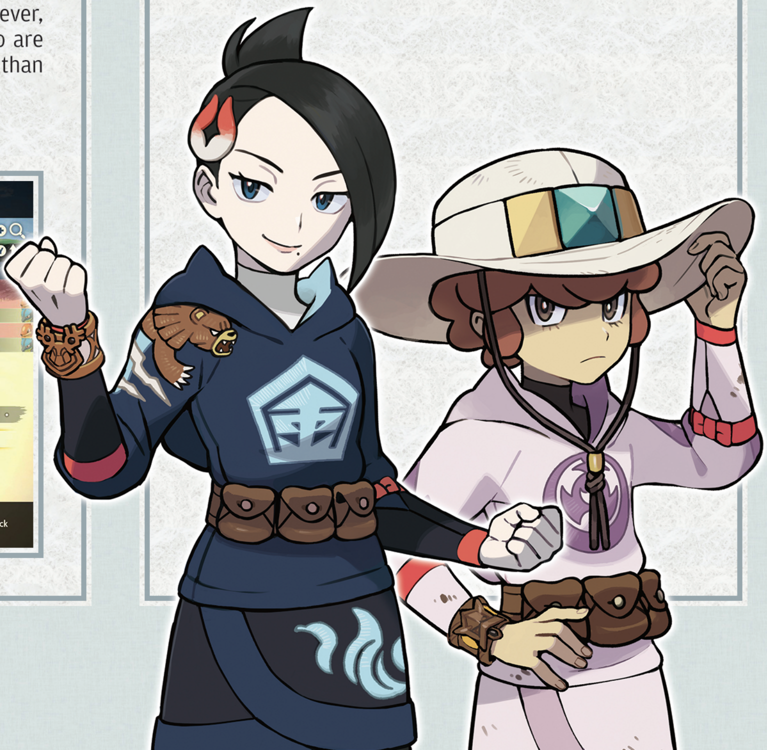
CLASH OF CLANS

Will you side with Diamond, or align with Pearl?

THE FRENZIED POKÉMON battles you'll face will each be with special "Noble" Pokémon that are under the protection of the various Wardens of Hisui. These are unique NPCs who will guide you, move the story along and keep an eye on your actions as you interact with the specific monsters they've been entrusted to care for.

The hat-wearing Lian seen below, for example, is the Warden who watches over Kleavor. You'll have to go through him in order to be allowed to battle that big axe-armed Bug/Rock warrior!

If you note the emblem on Lian's attire, too, you can see that he's a member of the Hisui region's Pearl Clan. Mai, the other Warden below, is instead a member of the Diamond Clan. And pictured above, the two clans' leaders: Adaman of the Diamond Clan on the left, and Irida of the Pearl Clan on the right. The politics of their conflict, as well as their spiritual beliefs and how they glorify "Almighty Sinnoh" (as Irida says) will be a major driving force in the story . . . and will likely lead you to encountering "Sinnoh" (a.k.a. Arceus?) for yourself!

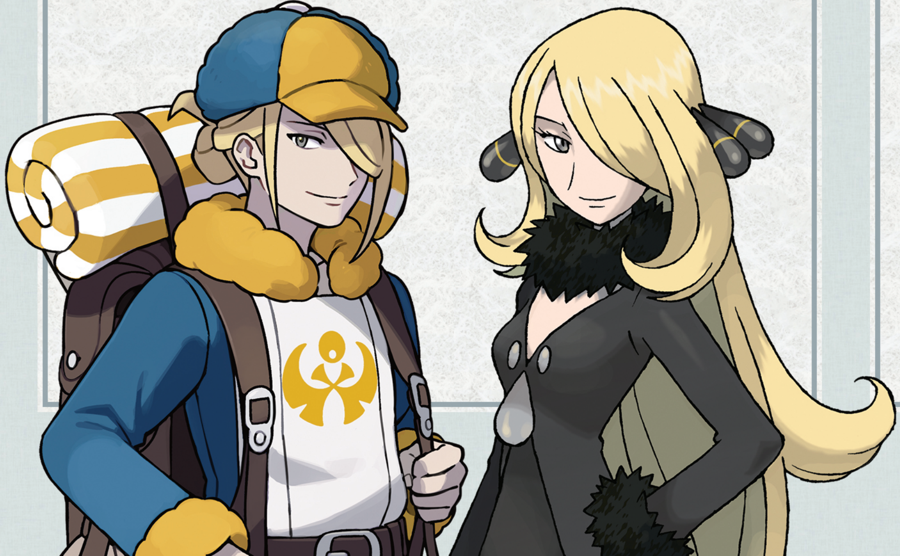


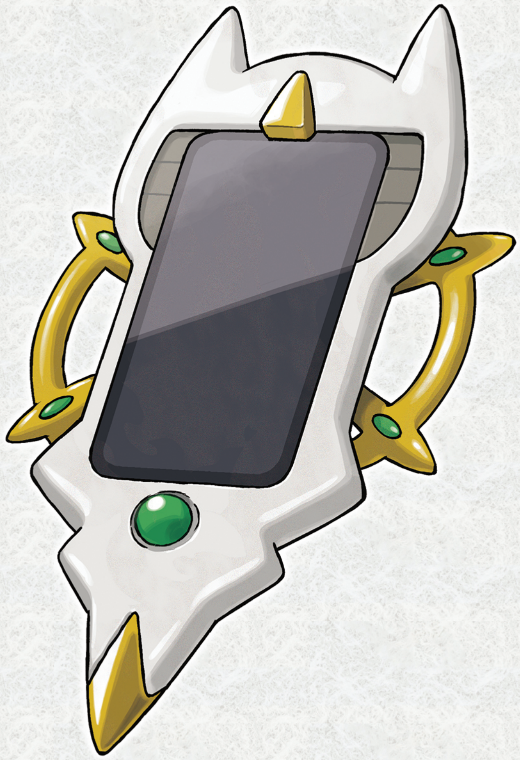
Family Resemblance

Get to know the ancestors of some familiar faces.

MOST OF THE heavy lifting to sell the "this is taking place a long time ago" past setting of Pokémon Legends: Arceus comes in through the design of the environments (with their lack of buildings or other signs of human civilization) and the rudimentary technology (even the Poké Balls are made of wood). But you'll also be transported to the past through the appearance of several familiar faces: the great-grandparents of many characters who live in the modern Sinnoh region!

For example, in the topmost pairing up there, Commander Kamado in this new game is clearly an ancestor of Professor Rowan from Diamond & Pearl. Likewise, Captain Cyllene must be the villainous Cyrus' grandma! It makes sense that all of them are in leadership positions in their lives – but even funnier may be Sinnoh Champion Cynthia's ancestor, Volo, who seems to be a simple merchant. (Perhaps he's hiding secret battling skills?)





Twisting Timelines

Wait . . . why is there a smartphone?

AS WE DRAW to a close here, a word of warning: All may not be quite what it seems in the Hisui region!

Yes, this game seems to take place entirely in the past – but there are also some curious twists in the timeline, like the appearance of a futuristic smartphone in this old era! Why is it there? Who brought it there? Why does its case look so much like Arceus? (And where can I buy one of those?)

There are a few time-traveling Pokémon in existence, like Celebi and Dialga (who lives in this land already), so get yourself set for some sort of time-shifting shenanigans on top of everything else you'll need to deal with! Mysteries abound, but we'll get answers when the final game arrives on January 28!

THE NINTENDO FORCE GAME OF THE YEAR AWARDS 2021

In accordance with annual video games journalism tradition, the Nintendo Force team has once again compared notes, discussed and debated the merits and flaws of all of the past year's new releases in order to arrive here: the printed ceremony of awardsgiving. Which titles will earn the respectful tip of Gold Mario's cap this time around? And will you agree with our selections, or be offended on behalf of the other contenders that were spurned? Read on!

BEST GRAPHICS
MONSTER HUNTER RISE

Nintendo has made it a point of pride to never offer the most graphically powerful hardware on the market, so when a dev team produces a true visual spectacle on a Big N machine, it's a mark of real mastery. In 2021 it was Capcom who blew us away with the gorgeous creatures and environments in Monster Hunter Rise!

BEST MUSIC
SKATEBIRD

Another year of incredible OSTs across the industry made this category truly competitive once again, but in the end the Nintendo Force had to honor the quirkiest soundtrack of 2021: SkateBIRD's! Its songs mix in actual ornithology lectures with their lo-fi beats, so you get an education as you're cruising tiny halfpipes.

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

BEST CHALLENGE
METROID DREAD

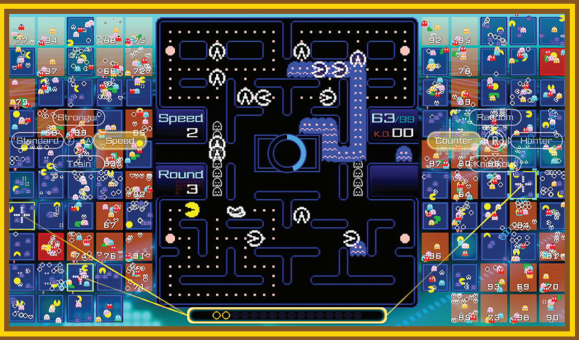
I've never seen the Game Over screen of a Metroid game so many times before! And yet Dread's degree of difficulty felt perfectly appropriate for this tense chapter of Samus' long-running saga. Boss battles were especially challenging, but practice and learning the patterns and proper timing ensured success in the end.

BEST THEME & FUN
WARIOWARE: GET IT TOGETHER!

The WarioWare series is the frontrunner for Nintendo's wackiest and most whimsical franchise ever, and yet its games have mostly been single-player affairs for the past two decades. Get It Together! finally addressed that deficiency, brilliantly introducing two-player play. Being weird is better when friends are weird together!

BEST MULTIPLAYER
PAC-MAN 99

Extending the series that started with Tetris 99 and continued with Super Mario Bros. 35, Pac-Man 99 once again pitted a plethora of players against one another in a massively multiplayer battle royale. The venerable Pac-Man game is over 40 years old now, but ideas like this have kept it feeling fresh all the while!



BEST PLAY CONTROL
METROID DREAD

A key reason why Metroid Dread's being lauded for its difficulty rather than derided is because, for all its challenge, it never really feels unfair. And that's because the game feels so smooth to control! Samus amasses a huge arsenal of weapons and movement items, but they all flow together beautifully well.

BIGGEST SURPRISE
METROID DREAD REVEALED!

It's a good thing I wasn't livestreaming my reactions to last E3's Nintendo Direct presentation, because when they went and made "Metroid 5" a reality after nearly two decades of waiting – and then actually named it Dread – I was screaming and celebrating in a display of truly embarrassing proportions. What a shock!

BEST REMASTER
SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD + BOWSER'S FURY

The Wii U masterpiece Super Mario 3D World didn't need much help making the transition to the Switch, so Nintendo focused their efforts on crafting a glorious bonus game that instantly became one of the best Mario adventures ever. Don't miss Bowser's Fury!

BEST NEW CHARACTER
RAVEN BEAK

For all the ways that Metroid Dread succeeds, the most surprising to me was how deep into the series' lore the developers delved – and how trusted the team at MercurySteam must have been to be allowed to do so! The most incredible inclusion in its multifaceted (and at times truly twisted) tale was actual, living Chozo characters. These beings of myth have been represented by statues, ruins and Samus' childhood memories in past games, but in Dread we actually got to encounter – and do battle with – members of this alien bird species. Chief among the flock is the truly intimidating main antagonist of this adventure, who almost effortlessly flings Samus aside in the opening cutscene and then serves as the target she's seeking to overcome for the rest of the quest. The Smash series may be done adding new fighters for a while, but Metroid as a franchise has another contender here! (Even if his name's a little silly. "Raven Beak?" Really?)

BEST REVIVAL
FAMICOM DETECTIVE CLUB

There were more contenders for this category than any other, as 2021 was filled to the brim with long-dormant series finally being reawakened! Metroid got a new, non-remake 2D adventure for the first time since Fusion in 2002. Pokémon Snap finally got a sequel after two decades' worth of fan requests. The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles got a long-awaited localization, The World Ends with You finally scored a sequel and No More Heroes fans who'd been waiting since 2010 got a new numbered sequel at last too. Blowing them all away by reaching even further back into the past, though, was Famicom Detective Club! This pair of games – The Missing Heir and The Girl Who Stands Behind – totally graphically overhauled and upgraded two visual novels first released by Nintendo all the way back in the '80s. And, even better, they didn't stay locked away in Japan this time! A full localization meant Western fans could finally, officially dive into these mysteries and get to meet Ayumi Tachibana outside of Melee's trophy collection.

BEST INNOVATION
GAME BUILDER GARAGE

Hidden behind all the cardboard construction projects of the Nintendo Labo series was a robust video game-making Garage mode that didn't get much attention. The Big N wisely revisited it and rebranded it as a standalone release, and it's now one of the best ways for aspiring game creators to learn the craft!

BEST DLC
SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE FIGHTERS PASS, VOL. 2

Ultimate ended 2020 with the addition of Sephiroth, then maintained momentum through 2021 with Pyra & Mythra in March, Kazuya in June and the pièce de résistance in October: Sora from the Kingdom Hearts series! No DLC was more hype-inducing than him.

THE 2021 NINTENDO FORCE GAME OF THE YEAR

METROID DREAD

Only the diehards knew about Dread. The final product might have just released in 2021 as a Nintendo Switch game, but its origins lie 16 years further back in the past, when the same concept – and same name – were first attached to a Nintendo DS project in the works. That one got canned. Then its ideas got revived in 2008, as the developers were hopeful they could bring them all to life if given a second chance. They didn't! The project was scrapped again, and again Yoshio Sakamoto was left with a vision for a follow-up to Metroid Fusion that just didn't seem to be feasible to actually create . . . not at that time, anyway. For years afterward Metroid Dread lived in the back of Mr. Sakamoto's mind. As even the diehard fans' memories faded and we began to no longer even imagine that Dread could actually become a reality any more, still he persisted, just waiting for the stars to align. Waiting to find the perfect team and the perfect technology. Well, the developers at MercurySteam turned in an excellent audition with 2017's Metroid: Samus Returns on the 3DS, and likewise 2017 also brought the Switch into the world – a system finally capable of handling the complexities the Dread story demanded. And so it happened. Finally, after essentially 16 whole years of development, Metroid Dread was completed and released. And it is a true masterpiece – one that was well worth the unimaginably long wait!

ENCOUNTER IN THE HALL OF ORIGIN

POKÉMON DIAMOND & PEARL
DS, 2007

POKÉMON PLATINUM
DS, 2009

As the Pokémon mythology's creator deity, it's understandable that actually capturing Arceus and adding it to your team (or shoving it into a PC Box) would be a little bit tougher than nabbing a common Zubat. Still, Nintendo made it more difficult than it otherwise should have been, years ago!

The scene seen above is one that was supposed to be accessible to most players – instead, it's only been witnessed by a handful of "cheaters" who decided to finish the job the games' developers left undone! This is The Hall of Origin, the place where players were originally intended to be able to encounter, battle and capture Arceus in the Gen IV Pokémon games. It lies in the sky above Spear Pillar at the peak of Mt. Coronet, and it can only be reached by bringing the special Azure Flute item up to the mountaintop and playing it to cause a glowing staircase to appear.

The problem? The Azure Flute can't be found through normal gameplay! It was meant to be an event-distributed item made available at some point after the release of Pokémon Platinum, following the distributions of the Secret Key, Member Card and Oak's Letter (all of which actually did happen). The Flute event was just cancelled, though, leaving players looking to legitimately "catch 'em all" to have to wait until a Toys Я Us event offered a different Arceus to customers in November 2009. **— LUCAS**

CHARACTER PROFILE
ARCEUS

The Original One who created the Pokémon world . . . and who also doesn't get the respect it should!

FIRST APPEARANCE
POKÉMON DIAMOND & PEARL
(DS, 2007)

CAREER HIGHS

The almighty Arceus burst onto the scene as the most impressive and intimidating Pokémon ever conceived – a truly Mythical titan among 'mons!

'07

After years of being sidelined despite supposedly being the greatest of all Pokémon, Arceus was finally honored in the climax of Pokémon Conquest.

'12

Likewise, the Super Smash Bros. series recognized its majesty, giving it the most rare and powerful Poké Ball summon of them all!

'14

Any fictional mythology's creator deity should be a revered and respected figure within its own world, and yet Arceus has only been shown middlingly adequate praise across the 15 years since it was first introduced in the DS era.

'22

Will Pokémon Legends: Arceus be the game that turns the tide and solidifies this worldbuilder's glorified status? Perhaps . . . until the series continues and we get something like Pokémon Legends: Dunsparce next.

CAREER LOWS

'09

. . . But its existence remained a secret, as it was not acknowledged by The Pokémon Company officially until it came time to promote its movie.

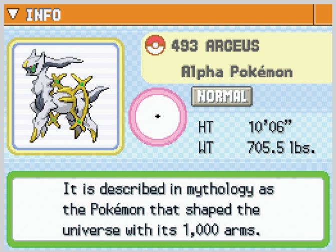
'09

Gamers in Japan got the chance to download a special Arceus into their games in connection with the movie! . . . But Western fans did not.

'15

Then it was shuffled back into the pile with all the other Legendaries and Mythicals, only trotted out for occasional cameos now and then.

HIGHLIGHTS



POKÉMON DIAMOND & PEARL
DS, 2007

Though nearly impossible to acquire honestly, those who did catch Arceus got to admire its power in the Pokédex . . . and got to wonder where exactly its 1,000 arms are hiding on its body.

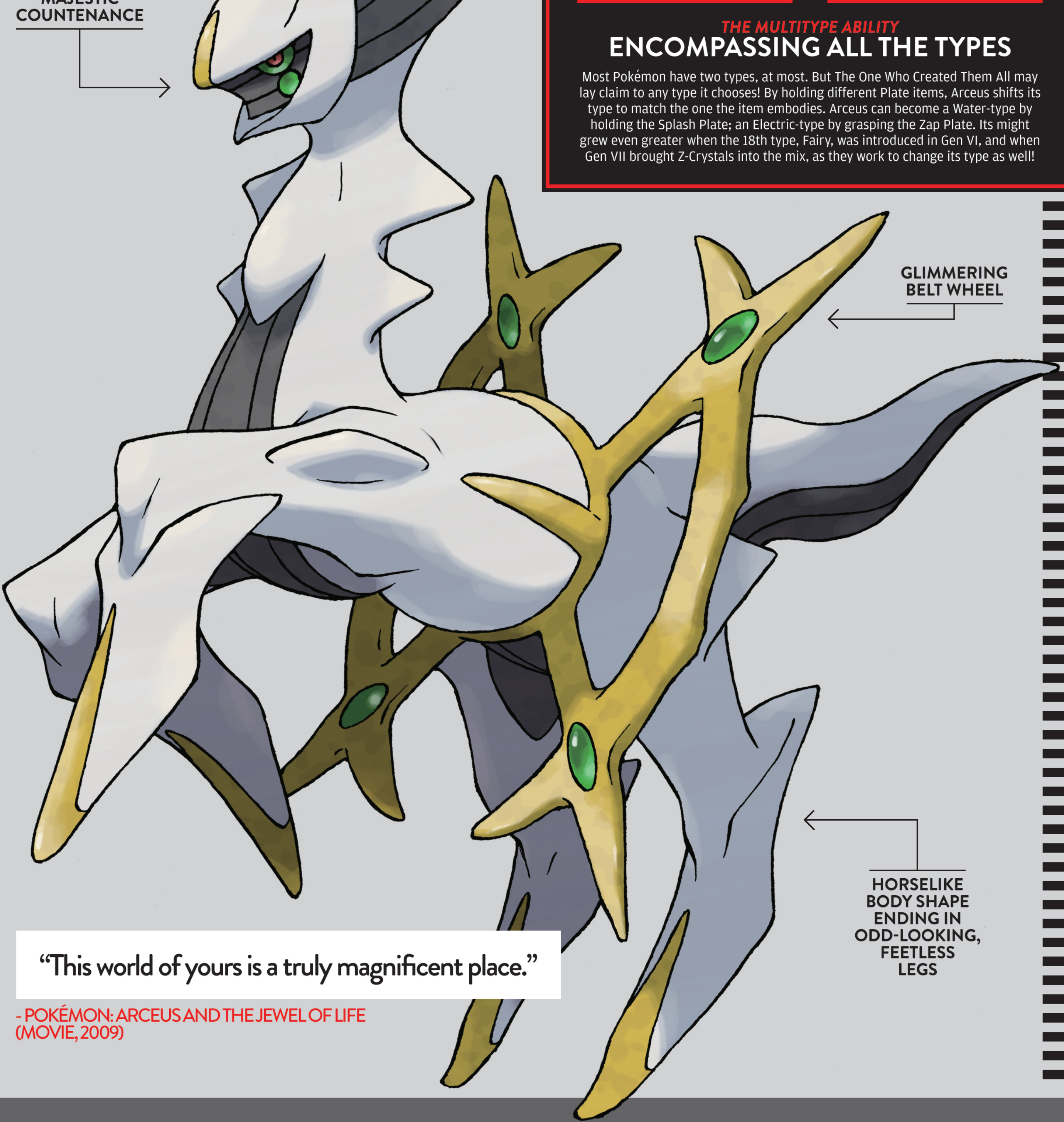
POKÉMON: ARCEUS AND THE JEWEL OF LIFE
MOVIE, 2009

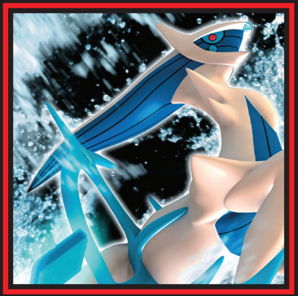
There have been so many different animated Pokémon movies that it's easy for any specific one of them to get lost in the shuffle, but Pokémon: Arceus and the Jewel of Life is one you should seek out if you want to learn more about this most mighty Mythical monster! It involves betrayal, time travel and Ash and Pikachu earning Arceus' eternal respect. Because of course it does!

POKÉMON LEGENDS: ARCEUS
SWITCH, 2022

With its name appearing within a video game title for the first time ever, Arceus must surely play a prominent role in Pokémon Legends' story. Perhaps as the final target to survey to complete the first-ever Pokédex of the Hisui region? Rumors suggest we may see an all-new form of Arceus make its debut in the game as well . . .

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS





THE MULTITYPE ABILITY

ENCOMPASSING ALL THE TYPES

Most Pokémon have two types, at most. But The One Who Created Them All may lay claim to any type it chooses! By holding different Plate items, Arceus shifts its type to match the one the item embodies. Arceus can become a Water-type by holding the Splash Plate; an Electric-type by grasping the Zap Plate. Its might grew even greater when the 18th type, Fairy, was introduced in Gen VI, and when Gen VII brought Z-Crystals into the mix, as they work to change its type as well!

"This world of yours is a truly magnificent place."

- POKÉMON: ARCEUS AND THE JEWEL OF LIFE (MOVIE, 2009)

30 YEARS LATER

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST

Celebrating three decades with Zelda's 16-bit masterpiece!

WHEN FANS OF The Legend of Zelda think of milestone games in the series, Ocarina of Time and Breath of the Wild are usually the two that come to mind. Both of these were monumental titles, but neither would have been possible without the framework of what came before them – particularly the impact from the now 30-year-old SNES hit, A Link to the Past.

The original The Legend of Zelda laid much of the groundwork, and Zelda II: The Adventure of Link helped Nintendo decide what directions *not* to go in for future titles. Back then, Nintendo was still experimenting with what the series was going to be. Certain aspects of its identity were already defined, like the main characters Link, Zelda and Ganon, and the premise of navigating dungeons to save Hyrule. But the first two games were wildly different from each other in terms of style and genre. One had a top-down perspective and the other was sidescrolling. The second game even featured RPG elements like leveling up, a mechanic that the main series games never returned to. Zelda hadn't found its footing yet.

It wasn't until the third game that Nintendo began to solidify the direction of the franchise. A Link to the Past took many ideas from the first two titles, used what worked, scrapped what didn't and created a stronger structure that would influence the series for decades.

A Link to the Past defined "the Zelda formula." This was the first Zelda title to introduce the conventions of three preliminary dungeons, a plot twist, then several larger dungeons in a darker setting. In A Link to the Past, this involved collecting three pendants in the Light World before the evil wizard Agahnim kidnapped Princess Zelda and sent Link to the Dark World, where he'd rescue a maiden in each dungeon. The formula was used in many Zelda games after it, like Ocarina of Time, The Wind Waker, Twilight Princess and Skyward Sword. Because the framework can be used to tell stories in unique ways, the structure feels timeless rather than overdone.

Another staple in the Zelda series that A Link to the Past established was using two parallel overworlds to broaden the game's scope, both in literal size and in story depth. This was done by introducing the Dark World at the story's turning point; it served as a counterpart to the Hyrule we knew before, but with a darker atmosphere and more threatening enemies to face. It doubled the size of the overworld, which already seemed vast and full of life to begin with. If A Link to the Past hadn't introduced this concept, it's possible that similar conventions in its sequels (such as Ocarina of Time's seven-year jump into the future or Twilight Princess' Twilight Realm) may never have existed.

A Link to the Past retained many aspects that made its predecessors great while improving on their shortcomings. Though the game wasn't strictly open-world, there was a sense of openness in terms of exploration and some possible deviations in dungeon order. And in A Link to the Past, items like the Hookshot and Fire Rod had major uses that were vital for progressing in the game – you couldn't rely on spamming sword attacks to kill everything in your path.

When someone describes a modern game as being "Zelda-like," these are the conventions and structure being referred to. A Link to the Past not only paved the way for future Zelda games, but it also inspired countless modern games like Blossom Tales and Eastward.

Though we saw major deviations from this Zelda formula with Breath of the Wild, there are still elements in that most recent title that were influenced by the groundwork A Link to the Past laid out. The beginning of the game when players are limited to exploring and completing the handful of shrines on the Great Plateau before being opened up to a wider world is reminiscent of that same structure. And in many ways, Breath of the Wild is doing what A Link to the Past did at the time: using strengths from previous titles while creating a new framework that future games can build off of. We already see others taking inspiration! **— REBECCA S.**

ORIGINAL RELEASE: SNES, APRIL 13, 1992
PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO

MY FIRST GAME

I was only 3 when I received a hand-me-down SNES and a handful of cartridges from an older cousin. Since I was a bit too young at that point to play completely on my own, my first experience with gaming was watching my Dad play. At random, he chose one of the games given to us for us to start with. It was A Link to the Past.

I don't remember much about being 3, but I have several distinct memories from that age of sitting cross-legged on my playroom floor and watching my Dad play. He controlled Link while I helped him decide where to go. Together, we rescued Zelda from the basement of Hyrule Castle and escaped to the safety of the Sanctuary.

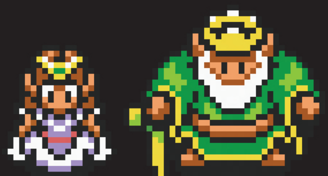
Along the way, my Dad read all of the game's text aloud as I followed along. He chose a soft, high-pitched voice for the princess' lines and a gruff, older voice for Sahasrahla, the village elder. I mimicked some lines when he spoke to a character twice. I still credit A Link to the Past for helping me learn how to read.

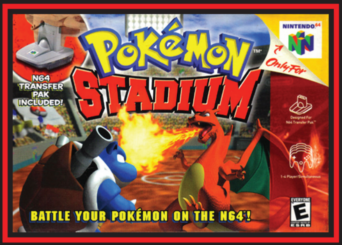
I cheered when we solved difficult dungeon puzzles and when we figured out how to defeat tough bosses. When my Dad was searching Hyrule for Heart Pieces, I was laying on my stomach flipping through the guide book, making up stories in my head about the characters and world.

After a while, I was no longer satisfied with being a passenger while my Dad had the steering wheel. I wanted to be Link! But I wasn't very good – I had never played a video game before. My Dad was patient and taught me the basics of using the sword to defeat the soldiers roaming around the overworld. Though I struggled with the mechanics at first, it delighted me when I was successful.

My Dad and I eventually beat the game together . . . and then we played it again and again. Each time, my skills improved. I went from defeating single-hit enemies to facing off against entire bosses. Those times, my Dad was cheering for *me*.

A Link to the Past wasn't just my first game in the Legend of Zelda franchise – it was my very first video game overall, and I can't imagine what my life would be like without growing up with those fond memories. I guess the bar was set pretty high, because to this day it remains my favorite game of all time! I think many other people with similar memories of it can say the same.





ORIGINAL RELEASE:
NINTENDO 64, FEBRUARY 29, 2000
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPERS:
NINTENDO EAD & HAL LABORATORY

ORIGINAL RELEASE:
NINTENDO 64, MARCH 26, 2001
PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO

ORIGINAL RELEASE:
NINTENDO 64, AUGUST 1, 1998 (IN JAPAN)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPERS:
NINTENDO EAD & HAL LABORATORY

TRANSFER PAK

This curious contraption carried communications between Game Boy cartridges and Nintendo 64 games, and was chiefly used by the Pokémon Stadium titles. Other games made use of it later, though, like the Mario Golf and Tennis games of that era, Mickey's Speedway USA and even Perfect Dark! Who knew this was special agent Joanna Dark's best piece of spy gear?

TRAPPED IN THE PAST
POKÉMON STADIUM & ITS SEQUEL (& PREQUEL?)

Has this series been rendered obsolete by the passage of time?

THE BOX DECLARED, "Battle your Pokémon on the N64!" – such a concept was something nearly next to magical.

Here we are on the verge of the release of the most expansive, most immersive 3D Pokémon adventure ever imagined, and I think it holds an extra special significance for older fans like yours truly who were there to play the 2D origins of this same saga. And not just 2D, but monochrome 2D – flat, black-and-white, low-resolution Game Boy graphics were all we had to depict the world of the Pocket Monsters way back when, and I know I wasn't the only Trainer who instantly longed to see my Pokémon team rendered with a bit more vibrance.

Maybe actually animated, too, instead of just sitting there flat on the screen.

Nintendo heard this collective call to action and acted immediately, recognizing an opportunity to build a bridge between the sudden phenomenal sales success of the Game Boy Pokémon games and the less-than-impressive market performance of their home console at the time, the Nintendo 64. They quickly turned out Pocket Monsters Stadium, a Japan-only N64 release that allowed players across the Pacific to see 3D models of Pokémon on their TV screens and set them against each other in battle! The game was compatible with a new peripheral, the N64 Transfer Pak, which allowed players to plug their Game Boy cartridges into the back of an N64 controller in order to transmit their team to the TV.

We never got that version. It's just as well, since that original Stadium game only supported 40 out of the 151 Kanto creatures! (It really must have been rushed out the door as quickly as possible.) The Pokémon Stadium that came to the States was actually a localization of Japan's Pokémon Stadium 2, a more fully featured game that supported all 151 monsters and was packed with extra activities beyond just battling in 3D as well.

Mario Party-esque minigames filled the Kids Club, including challenges like Sushi-Go-Round, in which four hungry Lickitungs try to eat as much food as possible to rack up a huge lunch bill. A mode named GB Tower called back to the previous hardware generation's Super Game Boy adapter by allowing players to play their Game Boy games on the TV by way of the Transfer Pak (but only the Pokémon games). The Gym Leader Castle challenge tested Trainers' battling skills against a gauntlet of tough A.I. opponents, and the prize for making it past them all was a rare Pokémon that could be transferred back to the Game Boy games! (I can't remember how many times I ran through that Castle in order to gather more and more Squirtles and Eevees!)

So Pokémon Stadium's appeal was plain to the N64 and Game Boy owners of two decades ago, and it got another installment that was compatible with the Gold and Silver cartridges just one year later. But simply seeing Pokémon rendered in 3D on a TV doesn't work as a sales pitch any more now, 20 years later, when that has since become common. My sons won't ever even remember a time when that wasn't the norm!

This, then, is an interestingly rare case of a small series of games that are trapped in the past, yes, but should probably remain there. There just wouldn't be any way to full recapture the experience in the here and now! But if Nintendo and The Pokémon Company wanted to tap back into Stadium nostalgia, perhaps a remastered minigame collection could be a good idea. I'd love to play Sushi-Go-Round again! **— LUCAS**

WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

THE 92ND ISSUE of Nintendo Power kicked off a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, with Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire taking the cover (or rather, covers, plural – see sidebar below). A dozen pages of coverage ensured that you didn't need to be a Jedi Master to overcome the Empire. In addition, the next eight pages of the Dark Horse comic tie-in were included, too!

Other titles promoted for the Nintendo 64 included NBA Hangtime and Cruis'n USA, while the Super NES explored the mysterious world of Krematoa from Donkey Kong Country 3: Dixie Kong's Double Trouble!, performed a few tricks with JVC's Magic Boy and made friends with a ghost named Casper, based on the then-recent movie of the same name. More classic Game Boy games were also being rereleased, including multiple Adventure Island, Castlevania and Tiny Toon Adventures titles.

Beyond Star Wars, this issue was Playing with Power in a big way with a six-page preview of the upcoming Mario Kart 64, complete with an interview with its director, Hideki Konno. The interview took place at Nintendo's Shoshinkai show in Japan, where we got to see glimpses of Star Fox 64, Yoshi's Island 64 (renamed "Yoshi's Story" upon release), Zelda 64 (later known as "Ocarina of Time," of course) and Blast Corps, alongside peeks at games that would never come to pass – at least, in the forms shown here – such as EarthBound 64 and Kirby's Air Ride. Future tech such as the Rumble Pak and 64DD were also highlighted, with an interview with Shigeru Miyamoto, Takashi Tezuka and Hideki Konno spanning the bottom half of four pages.

If all that wasn't enough – it was the January issue, bay-bay! That meant bonus content for NP subscribers! Those with the Power scored a 12-month calendar poster featuring Mario Kart 64, plus stickers featuring the Nintendo Power logo and images from various N64 titles to use for customizing their N64 Controller Paks. Sure, they were no Mega Man X pogs, but they were still pretty nice.

This month's Player's Poll contest invited readers to "Go ape on the ice like Kiddy and Dixie!" with a grand prize trip to the Olympic Sports Complex on Lake Placid, home of America's only Olympic bobsled run.

Shoshinkai coverage wasn't everything for Nintendo 64 sneak peeks, as Pak Watch closed out the issue with more Turok: Dinosaur Hunter, as well as exclusive first looks at GoldenEye 007 and Clay Fighter Extreme (a.k.a. 63 1/3).

The light turned green on the cover for February 1997's issue, as Mario Kart 64 finally took us off to the races! Its 12 pages of coverage were augmented by six-page previews each of GoldenEye 007 and Turok: Dinosaur Hunter. And if you thought business in a galaxy far, far away was concluded, five pages of Shadows of the Empire tips, a poster sharing space with James Bond and eight pages of Dark Horse's comic tie-in said otherwise.

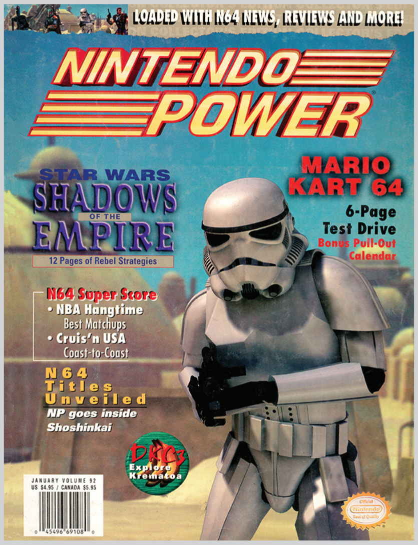
If that wasn't enough Wars in the Stars for you, eight pages were dedicated to rereleases of Star Wars for the Game Boy, as well as Super Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi for the Super NES. These were joined by coverage of Top Gear 3000, The King of Fighters '95 and Shigeru Miyamoto's Game Boy classic, Mole Mania.

Epic Center triumphantly returned, now with more 64! Glimpses of Enix's Wonder Project J2 and Zelda 64 were here, alongside a reminder that the Super Famicom was still a thing with a 16-bit remake of Dragon Quest III. Other previews spared a couple of pages for the original Harvest Moon, plus four more for Marvelous: Another Treasure Island, which some may recognize as the game where future Zelda steward Eiji Aonuma got his start as a designer. Rounding things out were more strats for Lufia II: Rise of the Sinistrals.

The grand prize winner of this month's Player's Poll would win Wayne Gretzky's 3D Hockey for the Nintendo 64, a Nintendo 64 to play it on, three extra N64 controllers to play with friends . . . and, oh yeah, the full arcade version of the game!

Finally, Pak Watch had exclusive first looks at War Gods and Kirby's Star Stacker, with a bit of DOOM 64, Game & Watch Gallery and Robotech: Crystal Dreams in the mix as well. **– DAVID**

ISSUE #92: JANUARY 1997



ISSUE #93: FEBRUARY 1997

VARIANT COVERS FOR ISSUE #92

During the '90s, comic book collecting exploded, and part of the hype was in providing multiple versions of the same book with variant covers. Nintendo Power decided they wanted a piece of that action, releasing four different Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire "collector's covers" for NP #92. 50% of the issues shipped were split evenly between Boba Fett and Shadows star Dash Rendar, while the majority (40%) wound up with a Stormtrooper. The remaining 10% went to random subscribers, who received the elusive bounty hunter IG-88!

BY JOHN-CHARLES HOLMES

INTERVIEW

DATE + PLACE OF BIRTH
October 8, 1984,
in New York, New York

FAVORITE FOOD
Bacon, egg & cheese on a bagel

LITTLE-KNOWN FACT
My favorite game genre is CRPG, not FPS.

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
CEO, New Blood Interactive

BEST KNOWN FOR
DUSK, Rise of the Triad, Memes

DAVE OSHRY

The man giving injections of new blood to some old game genres.

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NF: When was the moment that you first wanted to get into video game development?

DAVE: I used to make Wolfenstein 3D maps as a kid and tried to start my own game company when I was 11. I started putting cracked games on CD-Rs and selling them via AOL chat rooms. I didn't know that was illegal until my Mom made me send the money back.

How did you get into video game publishing and promotion?

I was a popular game blogger back in 2010 and frequently wrote about old FPS games like DOOM and Quake. There was an Unreal Engine remake of Duke Nukem 3D being attempted by a team called Interceptor Entertainment at the time and I'd covered them frequently. When they were ready to start on their first real project and needed a marketing guy, I got the call – and the rest is FPS history!

What inspired you to take derogatory terms like "Filthy Casual" and "Boomer Shooter" and turn them into successful brands?

Well I don't think either of those terms are "derogatory," per se. There's nothing wrong with being a casual or a boomer! Either literally or figuratively. And I think that's why people have cultivated identities around those terms. We're all Filthy Casual Boomers over here.

Speaking of Boomer Shooters, what makes them so appealing? Why are they doing so well these days, so many years after they first began to appear in the gaming scene?

Well, the easy answer is that nostalgia is a powerful drug. People long for the feelings that they got growing up playing games like DUSK and Amid Evil – which, back then, were games like Quake and Heretic.

A deeper answer is that all things go in cycles, and we've come back around to shooter games that have designs like they did in the '90s. Just like we've come back around from 2D pixel sidescrollers to N64- and PS1-looking horror games. Soon we'll be making Call of Duty 2-style shooters again.

People like us who grew up playing games like DOOM and Quake are now old enough to be making games, so we're always going to be reaching back into our child mind's eye to recreate the feelings we got from those games and putting them into our games. And having a lot of fun doing it.

You're also a pioneer in the specialized field of ridiculous website URLs. WeHate.Money, DevilMayQuake.com. It's rare to see a publisher be this self-deprecating, let alone while showing unabashed reverence for decades-old game franchises at the same time. But it really seems to be working. Why do you think that is?

Well, I've always loved advertising, and the best advertisements are the jingles and sayings you remember forever. *Like a good neighbor. I'm lovin' it.* If you can get someone to remember and find your product without having to research it, you've already won.

We originally were trying to find an easy website to get to DUSK like we had with AmidEvil.com, but obviously Dusk.com was taken, so we started coming up with ideas . . . and the first one that stuck was NotFortnite.com. Once that went a bit viral we knew we had to keep doing it. (DoomNoir.com, DeaderSpace.com, ThiefWithGuns.com, NotBloodborne.com and, of course, DaveOshrySucks.com.) Name.com has been happy to have me as a customer ever since.

Ever since DUSK first launched on PC, you've been getting requests to port the game to Switch. It doesn't exactly look like the kind of game that Nintendo fans were born to love, but once again, New Blood has defied expectations, making the game a handheld hit. What is it about DUSK that makes it such a great fit for Switch players?

Well, normally you'd be right. First-person shooters are not very popular on the Switch – especially fast-paced retro ones. So we knew if we wanted to start getting more people into FPS on Switch, we had to make something both our PC players and newcomers alike could get into.

We focused on making it perform as well as we could, while also controlling as smoothly as possible, so that even hardened PC players would think it felt even better on Switch. Apparently we did a pretty good job!

Now that we've made that happen, the door is open for our other games, as well as other games in the genre, to step up in order to make the Switch a more popular platform for twitchy retro first-person shooters.

DUSK '82 started off as an April Fools' joke – now it's a critically acclaimed part of the DUSK franchise. It's not the first fake April Fools' Day game announcement that made a big splash, but it's one of the few to go on to become a real game, and a highly successful one at that. What do you think it is about fake/joke games that often make them better than real games, and why do you think we don't see more?

I think oftentimes these fake games are so great because the ideas are so wacky and out of the box that you really just *hope* people will love it enough for you to actually make it. When Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon was teased, everyone thought it was the coolest thing ever, and the developers knew they would – which was why they were already making it!

Same goes for DUSK '82. We'd already been working on it, but we knew it was a silly enough idea that people would only half-believe it was real – so it was the perfect setup for an April Fools' joke.

It's no secret that Gabe Newell, founder of Steam (PC gaming's biggest storefront), is a hero of yours. What do you think of his upcoming Steam Deck handheld console? Do you think it could be a "Switch killer," or do you think both consoles can live together in peace and harmony?

Gabe is absolutely not a hero and I will have my revenge upon him for the 2020 PC Gaming Show. However, the Steam Deck is so far an awesome bit of tech and it will be very cool to be able to play my console-style PC games on the go. A Switch killer, though? As long as Nintendo still makes original games, that's not gonna happen.

Devolver Digital was one of the first big "indie publishers." Recently they went public and Sony bought a bunch of shares in the company. Would New Blood ever make a similar move? If so, would you still be "indie?" What is an "indie publisher" anyway? What are words? What do they mean?!

I mean, everyone has their price, but we're really not for sale and have no interest in being a public company. We're just a bunch of friends making games and doing well enough at it to keep making games and I'd like to keep it that way. I want shorter games with worse graphics made by people who are paid more to work less and I'm not kidding.

Most of the developers you work with were relatively unknown before you signed with them. Are there any bigger name developers that you'd want to collaborate with in the future? If so, what would you want to create with them?

Not really. Maybe Hideo Kojima?

If you could take any Nintendo franchise and make any game you wanted with it, what would you make and why?

The Legend of Zelda VR.

Finally, if you could have any superpower, what would it be and why?

The ability to conjure Mario Kart's Blue Shells to use in real life during traffic.

BIG JOHN

No one embodies the spirit of classic '90s first-person shooters better than Dave Oshry. Literally! Lurking in the shadows of most of New Blood's games is Big John, a 359-pound super soldier played by none other than Dave himself. He came here for two reasons: to destroy you and to impersonate Arnold Schwarzenegger from Predator. "Ha HA! C'mon! Kill me! Do it now! Hoohoohaha!" That's what you'll hear from Big John as he batters your body with a barrage of bullets. In DUSK, battling him breaks the tension with comic relief, while still shredding your health in seconds.

BY THOR THORVALDSON

Pictured here: two Legendary Pokémon singing a beautiful ballad in a perfect duet. Not quite so lovely: **Pokémon Brilliant Diamond** & **Shining Pearl**. Read two separate opinions in our full evaluations of both versions, just ahead!

Go Back in Time with Dialga

POKÉMON BRILLIANT DIAMOND

I'LL ALWAYS TREASURE Pokémon Pearl as the game that got me back into the Pokémon fandom, after the sight of fans playing it at Anime Boston the day it released made me decide to pick up a copy. I was excited to hear that there was truth to the rumors of Generation IV remakes for the Nintendo Switch, but all those months of anticipation for something that would hit all my nostalgia buttons ended up deflating my hopes within a few hours of restarting my Pokémon journey with Brilliant Diamond.

There are a few welcome QOL updates, such as the always-available PC Boxes, Affection helping turn the tide of battle and the Hidden Moves app on the Pokétch, but then there's the always-on Experience Share from Let's Go, which I would have loved to be able to turn off. The Underground has gotten an upgrade to the Grand Underground, complete with online play while capturing Pokémon and digging for treasure.

Another interesting development: The Unown are unchanged, except for the fact Hidden Power is now exclusively locked to them. Other changes are more out of necessity: the addition of the Fairy type, the Veilstone Game Corner has become the Metronome Fashion Shop and Contests have been reworked to feature decorated Poké Balls and a rhythm game as their main components.

I had many questions about how these two games would fit into the general Generation VIII universe, and it turns out that while they are remakes, they also stand alone – there's no Ranked Battle system or plans to make them part of the official competitive circuit. (There are some enterprising battlers who have started doing VGC-style battles in Union Rooms with specific passwords.)

I had mixed feelings about the art style. Some of the Sinnoh characters rendered as 3D models look cute – even Cyrus – but there are other NPCs that look like a Nendoroid head and torso on a Playmobil's legs. Much of the architecture looks great as well, and I liked how we get a full view of the town or city we're visiting when we read its signpost. While the open sea looks amazing – with sparkling sapphire waters complete with spreading ripples from swimming Trainers – the shallows are just a smidge paler and don't stand out as well as they did on the DS. One area that really stood out was the aftermath of Lake Valor after Team Galactic's attack – the level of destruction is magnified just enough in the remake to really drive the impact home, and it made me think that maybe it was better ILCA didn't portray it more realistically.

Gameplaywise, the challenge level had weird peaks and troughs – I found myself curbstomped by Maylene's Lucario, but in leveling up to defeat it, I managed to make my party overpowered enough to cut through the next three Gyms like a hot knife through butter, thanks to the always-on Experience Share. Unless you're lucky enough to capture a few Pokémon that were added in the Grand Underground, the Pokédex is still largely the same as the original. Compared to the updates that were added in the remakes of the Generation II and Generation III games, there really wasn't much special or different until after the postgame, and the entire experience just felt like a slog through mud.

I honestly think ILCA's decision to play it safe was the biggest thing that hurt Brilliant Diamond. Maybe if it had included a few more of the story beats and improvements that were introduced in Platinum, I'd be giving it a higher grade. However, it's also a good starting point for new fans to the franchise – provided you don't mind a little challenge. Playing through Brilliant Diamond was one of the most disappointing Pokémon experiences I've had, and on the whole I generally like the mainline games.

At least there's Pokémon Legends: Arceus to look forward to.

– REBECCA R.

6.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: ILCA RATING: E

Revisit the Past with Palkia

POKÉMON SHINING PEARL

I THINK REBECCA arrived at the exact sentiment Nintendo was hoping for – leaving long-time fans unsatisfied with a bland, basic rehash of the original Sinnoh games so that they'll take another look at the upcoming Arceus adventure and want to give that a try instead, hoping it'll provide an earnestly interesting return to this same territory. We'll soon see whether Pokémon Legends lives up to its own lofty title, but I can instantly agree with my colleague here and let you know that this pair of Diamond & Pearl remakes falls well short of shining, and nowhere near brilliance. Quite the opposite, in fact! These games are dull.

Pokémon fans have been calling for remakes of the Generation IV games ever since the Gen III remakes hit the market. That's probably because those games, Pokémon Omega Ruby & Alpha Sapphire, actually had some ambition to them when they hit the 3DS back in 2014! They had new forms for their box Legendaries: Primal Groudon and Primal Kyogre. They had a cool "Soar" feature that let you fly through the sky above a 3D-modeled Hoenn region and decide where you wanted to land. They had a brand-new endgame quest, the Delta Episode, that extended the story, introduced a cool new antagonist and had some killer new music. They were great!

There is no equivalent list of fresh features to applaud for Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl. This pair of remakes was swept aside by the primary Pokémon development team and assigned instead to ILCA, an unproven studio who've done little to raise their reputation with this effort. Perhaps afraid to overstep and do anything new, the ILCA team turned in the most by-the-book remake imaginable. These games are almost entirely unchanged from what DS owners first played in 2007.

There are some improvements. In the run-up to these releases I did get honestly excited about the expanded Grand Underground area and the fact that the process to use Hidden Moves to navigate around the environment has been greatly streamlined. Those changes are as nice as I'd hoped, so credit where credit's due there.

But my goodness, Sinnoh is, as Rebecca put it, such a slog through the mud. You will lose count of how many dozens of Bidoofs you'll be forced to defeat on your journey. The evil team of this region is pathetically weak – even at the culmination of their story arc when you're fighting your way through their headquarters after earning your seventh Gym badge, they still send out laughably ineffective monsters like Wurmples and Silcoons to oppose you. It's nowhere near a challenge – it's literally just wasting your time.

I could go on! But suffice it to say, these games are profoundly lacking for any adult players who might have been hoping for an exciting return trip to an old favorite Pokémon region.

Their saving grace, for me, is that I'm not the only player playing them in the Thomas home. My sons are getting to live this story for the first time with these versions. And Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl are much better suited to serve as kids' games for young players who've never seen the Sinnoh region before.

They've noticed their shortcomings too – Calvin has commented over and over again while playing that he's seeing the same small set of Pokémon pop up, wondering aloud when any new species will actually make an appearance. But I'm sorry, son. This is Sinnoh. The Pokédex here, even with a bit of a boost from the new Grand Underground, is still the weakest in the series.

If you're a Switch owner looking to play a Pokémon game, this pair should be your third choice after the Let's Go games and Sword & Shield. And if Pokémon Legends: Arceus turns out to be as good as these are bad, maybe we can all just safely ignore them?

Here's hoping Gen V's inevitable remakes get more effort. **– LUCAS**

6.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: ILCA RATING: E

It's NERF or Nothin'

NERF LEGENDS

POKÉMON LEGENDS AREN'T the only legends being passed down on the Switch these days – there are also NERF Legends! (Unfortunately, not all legends are truly legendary.)

Coming hot on the heels of playing Hot Wheels Unleashed, I dove into this first-person shooter with the same goal driving its design: to take a beloved childhood toy brand and adapt it into a modern, jaw-droppingly exciting video game experience. And like that Hot Wheels game, this NERF one does manage to present exciting moments – they're just much fewer and more far-between than the more consistent thrills of Unleashed.

NERF Legends takes the foam dart-firing plastic weapons we've known for decades and builds a whole sci-fi world around them. In this world, an aging NERF champion is seeking a successor to his grand legacy, and so he invites a group of young contenders – including you – to his elaborate NERF training grounds to test your skills.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: GAME MILL
DEVELOPER: FUN LABS
RATING: T

After passing through a create-a-character screen with a minimal amount of likeness-altering options, you're tossed into a series of run-and-gun challenges to prove that you're the best of the bunch.

They're rough. Some sequences are energetic and fun, as you duck, dodge and dash around contained arenas doing battle with legions of robo foes that range from human-shaped bot warriors to scuttling crab bots to big, hulking gorillas. But these high points are connected together by frustrating lows.

The level design is frequently confusing, and knowing which way to go next is often a struggle. Some objectives are clearly labeled, while others are hidden throughout the environment – too well, in many cases. Interior areas are often cramped, making it difficult to move the camera in a way that lets you clearly see where you're going. Enemy spawns are inconsistent – sometimes you'll clear out a whole room or outdoor battle space and the enemies will stay gone. Other times they'll keep respawning. Other times they'll only respawn if you step on a loading trigger again.

Choppy screen transitions and loading times don't help matters either. And being a multiplatform game running on the Switch, it doesn't measure up visually to the more vibrant versions players could be playing on PC, Xbox or PlayStation systems. (Though reports from other reviewers tackling those versions suggest that they're more bug-riddled and disappointing than this one is.)

There is one area in which this edition is perfectly on par with other platforms, though: the total lack of multiplayer! The multiplayer mode appears to be functional here, as I was able to begin a game . . . but no one else was online. So I was the only player, running around in an arena with no one else to blast. I'm not even sure why it would allow you to start a multiplayer session with zero opponents present . . . maybe just to practice and memorize the map? But there's no use gaining that knowledge since, apparently, you'll never be able to match up with anyone else here.

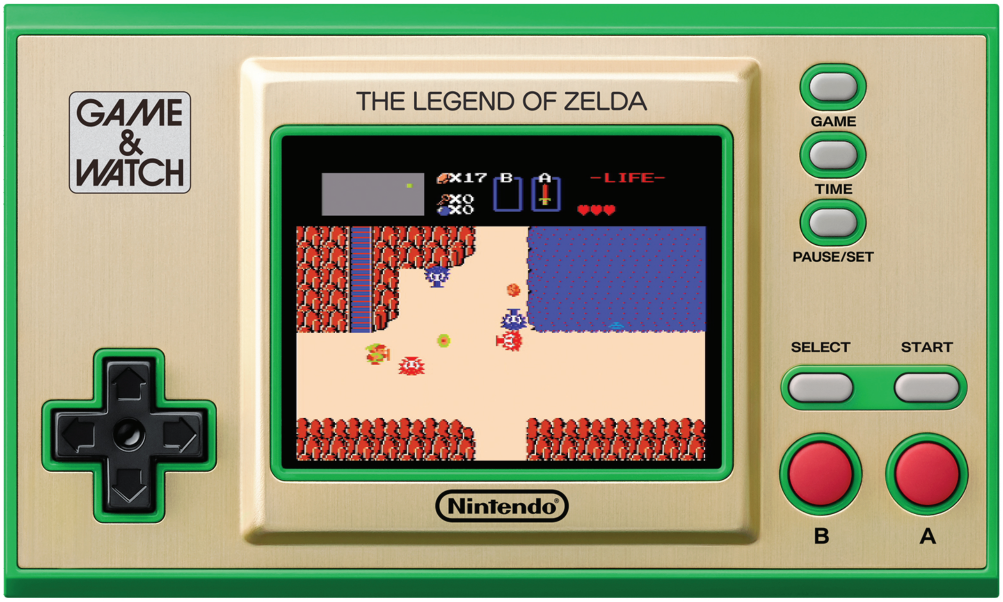
Maybe you and a friend could both get copies of the game and then purposefully make a lobby at the same time of day and see if it connects the two of you. You're welcome to try! I'm not going to subject anybody else to this, though. (And you might lose that friend as a friend if you try.)

There are other complaints to lodge, but I'll end with the worst of the bunch: This just isn't a good representation of the NERF brand. It's like this was a generic FPS game that already existed, and they licensed the NERF name and changed the gun models to look like real NERF toys at the last minute. It just doesn't capture any of the fun of the toy line at all. Hot Wheels Unleashed got that part right, giving us a different way to play with its classic cars that actually made sense and was engaging. This isn't.

So if you've been considering a purchase of the NERF Legends game, go ahead and stop considering it. Take the dollars you would have spent on this video game and use them to buy more real NERF weapons and ammo instead. You'll have a whole lot more fun that way.

And in the future? Maybe the NERF name will end up getting applied to a better video game. **– LUCAS**

4.0



G&W PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E

8.5

Handheld Hyrule

GAME & WATCH: THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

NINTENDO BROUGHT BACK the old Game & Watch product line in 2020 with Game & Watch: Super Mario Bros., and while it was a neat little thing, it left a lot to be desired. But this new Zelda Game & Watch corrects almost all of the Mario unit's issues, making it not only a remarkably cool collectors' item, but almost certainly the best Game & Watch unit Nintendo has ever produced.

For the uninitiated, Game & Watch first was a line of simple handheld LCD games Nintendo produced back in the '80s. They were fun, affordable little devices that played addictive built-in games and doubled as portable clocks – hence the name "Game & Watch." They're also an incredibly important part of Nintendo's history, having first brought us some of their biggest innovations, like the NES controller's four-directional D-Pad, the Nintendo DS' dual-screen setup and even the breakaway controllers of the Nintendo Switch. The Game & Watch product line was kind of a big deal, and it's still well deserving of the occasional celebration.

This new unit's form factor and button layout seems to be a cross between an NES controller and the original Game & Watch "Gold" and "Wide Screen" series. Missing from the Gold Series is the built-in metal kickstand, but they make up for it with the clever ability to fold the box's internal tray into a nice-looking display stand.

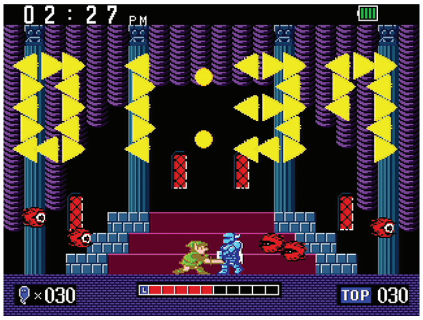
In terms of colors, it's a pretty interesting mix, featuring the brushed metal surface of the original Gold series models and a solid green trim that harkens back to the original 1989 Zelda Game & Watch unit (albeit a bit brighter). It also runs on a rechargeable internal battery, which makes keeping it alive pretty easy, and as an added bonus, there's a neat light-up Triforce logo on the back.

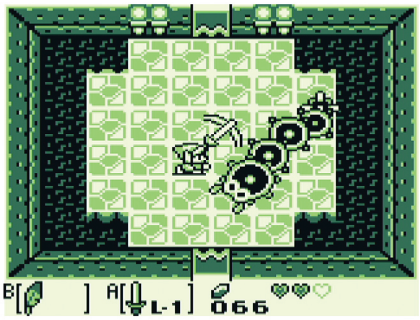
As for what you can actually use the thing for, it includes The Legend of Zelda, Zelda II: The Adventure of Link, the original Game Boy version of The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening, the original Game & Watch game Vermin (with Link in place of Mr. Game & Watch) and both an interactive clock and timer based on Zelda and Zelda II, respectively. That's a solid lineup right there, but they went the extra mile and also included the Famicom Disk System versions of Zelda and Zelda II, as well as a handful of regional options for Link's Awakening.

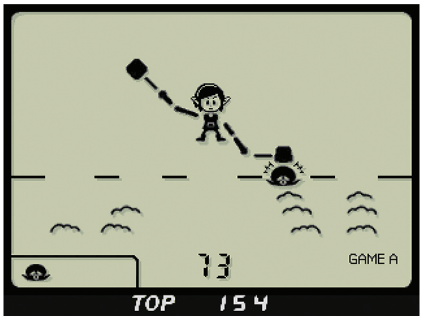
These games are a much better fit for a Game & Watch than Super Mario was, thanks to their more passive gameplay. And they all look and play great, especially Link's Awakening, which is presented in its original monochrome format. The colorized DX version is arguably superior, but I've always felt the black & white version looks more cohesive overall. (Though the decision to not simply include the DX version as well in this Game & Watch is indeed a bit of a head-scratcher.)

Even stranger is the omission of both existing LCD Zelda games – in particular the actual 1989 Zelda Game & Watch game. A single-screen version of it already exists in Game & Watch Gallery 4 for Game Boy Advance, while the Nelsonic Game Watch game has never been rereleased in any form. Their absence is a huge missed opportunity to celebrate a rarely explored piece of Zelda's history.

Missing games aside, every detail of this thing is brimming with reverence for The Legend of Zelda. Where last year's Super Mario unit seemed hastily put together, this feels like a more complete package. If you're a serious Zelda collector, it's as imperative as the Triforce itself. **– KRIS**







Party Like It's 1999!

MARIO PARTY SUPERSTARS

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: NDCUBE RATING: E

THE COUNTDOWN to midnight on December 31, 1999, was a time of true stress for millions of people around our planet. The global population had become gripped with fear about "Y2K" – a panic that, when computer system calendars worldwide tried to flip their two-digit year value over from "99" to "00," all kinds of mayhem was bound to happen. The stock market would crash! Airplanes would fall out of the sky! Mass hysteria would reign!

I wasn't worried about any of that. I was a teenager at home in Kentucky, spending my New Year's Eve playing Mario Party.

(Though that was an experience full of its own brand of mayhem.)

The Mario Party series kicked off on the Nintendo 64 in 1999 with a debut game that was received so well that it instantly got back-to-back sequels in the following years: Mario Party 2 arrived on January 24, 2000 (the world had not ended a few weeks earlier, oddly enough) and Mario Party 3 completed the N64 trio in 2001. In those early years of the Party series' existence, staying up late on New Year's Eve and playing multiple rounds of the latest installment became a tradition for my younger brother and I, as we'd invite friends over and battle it out in Mario's virtual board game challenges up until the ball dropped in Times Square . . . and then beyond!

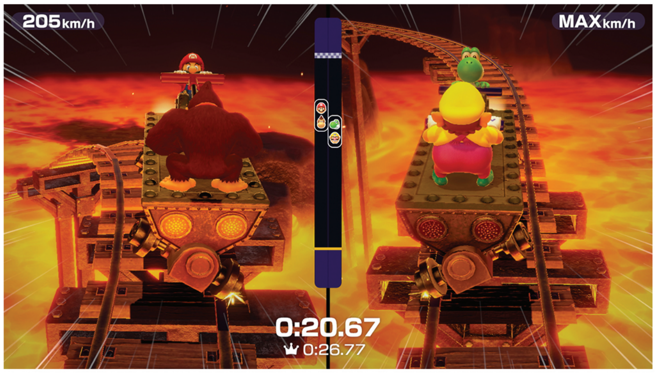
And so it's especially nostagically thrilling to me that Nintendo's latest trip into the past has produced Mario Party Superstars, which specifically revives and reinvigorates a lot of that earliest Mario Party era. There are five different game boards to choose from in this series sequel, but all five are beautifully visually overhauled takes on boards originally seen in Mario Party 1, 2 or 3. It's not a large selection – more thoughts on that later – but the five that are here make up a good mix of thematic variety and tactical appeal.

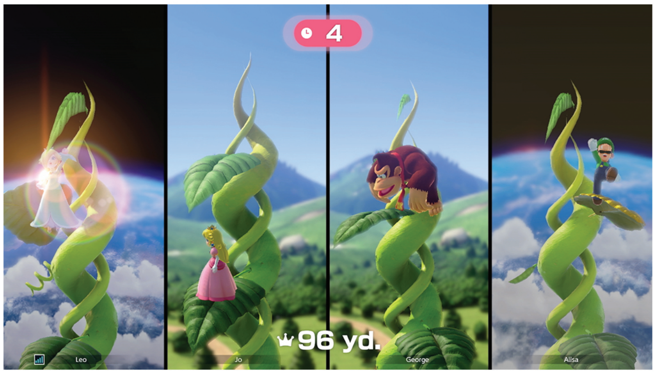
First up, from the first Mario Party, you get Yoshi's Tropical Island. At a glance it's a simple board divided into two loops – one circling an island on the left, and the other encompassing another island on the right. The trick is that the position of Toadette's Star-purchasing space is constantly leaping back and forth between the two, so you have to be running around the right loop at the right time in order to run into her and buy each Star. Our Thomas family playtesters – myself, my wife Mary and my two oldest sons, Carter and Calvin – enjoyed this map, but thought the Star Space bounced between its two possible positions too frequently, which was frustrating.

We celebrated Carter's birthday by playing a round on the second board pulled from Mario Party 1: Peach's Birthday Cake. On that board, the Star Space never moves – your characters are simply tasked to make multiple trips around the circumference of a huge cake to revisit it in its same spot again and again. The trick there? Players can choose to plant Piranha Plant traps that snap at opponents, stealing Coins (or even Stars!) away if they land on an unlucky spot. It's a good board too, and the most straightforward of the set.

Moving on to the echoes of Mario Party 2, we next played on the Space Land board. It's a visual spectacle for sure, headlined by a huge Bowser-shaped satellite that blasts a massive laser out of its mouth and zaps the Coins from any players unlucky enough to be in the central corridor of the map. (Mary especially enjoyed Space Land, because she dominated in that round and defeated all us boys, amassing tons of Stars by the end!)

I was disappointed that Nintendo didn't fully recapture the decades-old nostalgia here, though, as back in the N64 version of Mario Party 2, all the characters wore special costumes to match the theme of each board. The





game could have been called Mario Costume Party! But, sadly, the astronaut outfits originally donned for Space Land shenanigans were left in the closet for this version.

Likewise, the wizard clothes that the cast first wore in Horror Land are also no more. As a board, though, its new HD Switch revision is gorgeous. Its gimmick is a constant day/night cycle, as the sun sets or rises every two turns. In the daylight, navigation is easier since pathway-blocking Whomps can be bribed to move out of your way. Under cover of darkness, though, they fall asleep and become impassable obstacles — though *that's* counterbalanced by Coin- and Star-stealing Boos waking up! If you really plan well, you can even pay a visit to King Boo and pay 150 Coins to get him to steal three Stars at a time — one apiece from each of your three rivals! (We haven't achieved that yet, but Carter is determined to do it at some point in the future.)

Finally, there's the two-tiered forest of Woody Woods, returning from Mario Party 3. It's got a happy-go-lucky woodland area paired with a dark and spooky upper terrace, and it's filled with Monty Moles who pop up at the end of each round in order to spin a set of arrow signs and alter the direction your characters will travel in when they pass by. It may be my own favorite of the set, but we probably need to play each one a time or two more to know for sure.

. . . And, well, we'll have to! Since there are only five boards, after all.

That low number (while still one higher than Super Mario Party's paltry four) is the low point of this package, for sure. Though I remain hopeful that Nintendo could expand the selection at some point in the months ahead — either by free updates or paid DLC, I think there would be a lot of interest in adding more options here. Even just sticking with remaking the old boards from the first three Parties, there are several more options! Mario Party 1 had eight different boards all by itself!

Luckily, there's a wide range of minigames here that bring in a lot of variety. A total of 100 minigames have been drawn from the whole mainline Mario Party lineage, so you'll get some that are as old as Party 1 all the way up to as new as Party 10 from Wii U. I like that decision — keeping the boards themselves as nostalgic as possible by only choosing from the oldest available, but not putting that same limit on the minigames seems like it was the right call to make.

How are your Joy-Cons holding up? And your Pro Controllers, they good? Because if any of your Switch controllers have developed even the slightest touch of stick drift over the last few years, Mario Party Superstars will let you know that immediately.

There's a new Stickers feature that allows players to communicate their feelings about how the game is going, even when it's not their turn. Stickers are activated by moving the Control Stick to open up a menu to browse through and select which Sticker you'd like to use. But just the tiniest hint of movement will pop that menu into action, so our family's been plagued by a near-constant assault of all four players' Stickers menus activating of their own accord as we play, since the drift of our well-worn controllers gets detected and interpreted as deliberate movement. It's not! After all the complaints Nintendo's had about Joy-Con drift for years, it boggles my mind that they didn't foresee this problem.

So that's two chief complaints here, but really nothing too egregious. As a total package, Mario Party Superstars is indeed pretty super.

But is it *more* super than Super Mario Party? That's the real question, now that the Switch is hosting two distinctly different Mario soirées. I think it comes down to the dynamics of the group you'll be playing with. My family has enjoyed Super Mario Party for years largely because of its Partner Party mode that lets a group of four pair off for a two-against-two tussle. That mode isn't here in Superstars, as everything's an individual affair here. If you've got young kids, I'd suggest starting with Super so two youngsters can be paired up with one grown-up apiece.

Here in the Thomas home, our New Year's Eve plans will probably involve a bit of both. Because you know I just had to bring back that old tradition as soon as I had a big enough family of my own to fill out a Party! **— LUCAS**

8.5

6.5

A Quest Across Past, Present & Future

CRIS TALES

AT FIRST GLANCE, Modus Games' RPG Cris Tales has a beautiful and charming art style – probably one of the best from games released in 2021.

It's too bad that, for the most part, that beauty is only skin deep.

Cris Tales may be pretty to look at, but it's mired in problems. Some of these are specific to its Nintendo Switch version. Others are related to how the game manages its time, which is ironic considering its premise is about a heroine who manipulates time to save her world.

In Cris Tales, you take on the role of Crisbell, a young woman who discovers she has the powers of a time mage and can see the past, present and future at the same time. Much of the premise is standard JRPG fare. Crisbell must learn to master her powers to defeat a powerful foe; she gathers spunky allies, and they help people while on their journey. This last part is unique because Crisbell's aid effectively changes characters' futures, and that went a long way toward making these quests feel worth it!

Unfortunately, as Crisbell gets better with her time magic, the game gets worse with how it manages its time. Throughout most of Cris Tales, you explore four main cities and help determine their citizens' futures with your choices.

I never felt like these areas took too long, and this is where Cris Tales' art style delivers. Each land you explore has cute, colorful environments – from Cinder, a village located in a lake of lava, to St. Clarity, a city with multiple levels and waterways running throughout.

But once you arrive near the end of the game, Cris Tales makes you backtrack through these four locales. Twice. Making matters worse, it's at that point where the story divulges some twists and turns, and it kills all the momentum from those reveals.

After all the backtracking, you're given an awkward, rushed ending that tries to tie together these new story threads, but ultimately falls short. Cris Tales needed to spend more time fleshing out its story rather than making you retrace your steps.

Also, I can't recommend that you play this game on Switch when other versions exist on PC and PlayStation and Xbox consoles. Loading times are rough. Cris Tales features random encounters as you explore its many dungeons, and while those can be polarizing on their own, they're made worse by the long loading times leading into and out of each enemy encounter. Traversal becomes more of a slog than an enjoyable journey.

The game was released in July, yet I still found bugs that hindered exploration and sidequest completion. It's understandable to see those types of issues at release, but I'm confused as to why they haven't been patched out several months later.

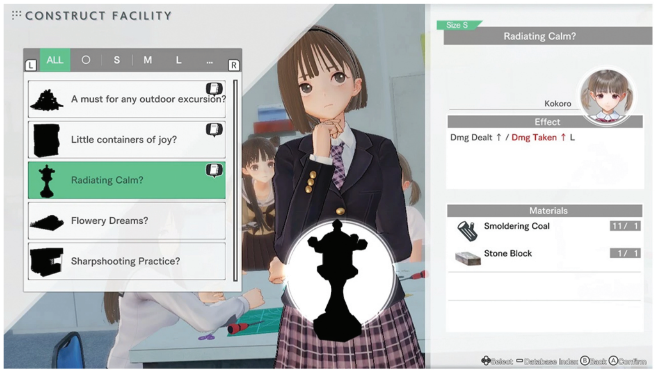
Another puzzling issue is that the Switch version doesn't allow you to capture screenshots or video clips, while other platforms do.

Cris Tales does have redeeming qualities beyond its art style. I enjoyed getting to know the cast – Crisbell and her friends are intertwined within the overall story in interesting ways, and their growth together as a group is sweet to watch.

The game's turn-based combat system also shines. Each character brings something unique to the system. Crisbell's time magic allows her to send enemies to the past and future, which can either weaken or strengthen them – using that power strategically is key. Another character, Zas, has abilities completely based on a roulette wheel, which can help you or hurt you depending on the situation.

After finishing Cris Tales, though, I kept asking myself, "Was this game about time worth 20+ hours of my time?" Honestly, I don't think it was. If you're thinking about this one, I'd advise you to seek out a demo on a different platform before you decide if it's worth yours. **– MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: MODUS GAMES DEVELOPER: DREAMS UNCORPORATED & SYCK RATING: T



Amnesia Academy

BLUE REFLECTION: SECOND LIGHT

THIS GAME MAY not be the most well-known JRPG of 2021, but it's one of the most well-rounded.

Blue Reflection: Second Light avoids problems you often see in this genre. Its gameplay systems don't try to do too much, its story doesn't overstay its welcome and its cast continues to feel meaningful as it grows. It's a pleasant and somewhat repetitive experience, for better or worse.

Second Light serves as a sequel to 2017's Blue Reflection and weaves another tale about Reflectors: young women who harness their emotions to wield magical powers. (Note: Second Light does spoil events from the first game, but also explains them in a way that you don't need prior knowledge.)

You play as Ao Hoshizaki, a girl who finds herself enrolled at a mysterious summer school – with no memory of how she got there. More young women arrive with their memories gone too, and your task is to recover them and figure out what's going on.

This concept showcases Second Light's main strengths: the cast, the beautiful visuals and the music used to illustrate the inner workings of their hearts.

The Reflectors enter the game one or two at a time, increasing the cast slowly, which helped me get to know them via the main story and bonding events. They all had time to shine, including my favorites: the goofy and mischievous Yuki Kinjou and the serious Uta Komagawa, who struggles with her cruel past actions. As the story progressed, none of the characters stopped being relevant, and that can be a challenge with a large cast.

Once new characters arrived at the school, their "Heartscapes" also opened up. Heartscapes serve as the dungeons in Second Light and visually represent the cast's memories. Gust's penchant for gorgeous environments really shined here. Each Heartscape looked beautiful and different from the others, but they also told stories from the cast's lives.

Rena Miyauchi's Heartscape showed what it's like to fall in love, with environments on the beach and dancing stars. Second Light's excellent soundtrack adds to the moods of these areas. Rena's Heartscape featured a song full of hope and happiness, while another Heartscape's music invoked dread as a character recalled her time suffering with an illness.

The Heartscapes also include enemies, and Second Light's combat provides a mix of action and turn-based elements similar to what you'd find in Gust's Atelier Ryza games. In real time you wait for characters' Ether Points to build up, and then you can pause time to select abilities. The battles were usually quick, with some requiring you to think about how to spend or save that EP!

Second Light also features a crafting system where you gather ingredients in the Heartscapes and use them to make items and installations for the school. I spent way more time on the latter than I expected, but it was so fun! Characters bring ideas on how to improve the school, from food and festival stands to gardens and vending machines. You can choose what to build and where to place the new additions, making for an enjoyable, creative activity where you can make the school your own.

Second Light felt like a safe, comfortable game the entire time I played – but it took that concept a little too far for me. The combat difficulty waned after the first 10 hours, and the chapters mostly followed the same pattern. I couldn't help but feel like my time spent acquiring gear and clearing out enemies didn't hold much weight. I wanted more challenge and variety in those areas to keep me invested, especially at the end where the story was at its weakest.

If you enjoy cozy games, Second Light is a no-brainer to recommend; just don't go into it expecting anything demanding or super innovative.

– MAGGIE

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: KOEI TECMO DEVELOPERS: KOEI TECMO & GUST RATING: T

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: ATLUS RATING: M

Neither Human nor Demon

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V

WHAT WOULD YOU do if a deity offered you limitless power? Would you share that power with them? Would you keep it for yourself? Would you even accept it? These are just some of the profound questions that were thrown my way while playing Shin Megami Tensei V, Atlus' dark and immersive turn-based RPG that isn't afraid to challenge fans' beliefs about themselves and the world around them.

From its conception as a novel back in the late 1980s, Megami Tensei (or MegaTen for short) has always focused on the alliance between humans and gods and the difficulties that can arise from negotiating that relationship. The original Shin Megami Tensei games stuck to that premise, but over the years various spin-offs – particularly Persona – began to focus more on the human cast than the deities themselves. SMT V is here to remind you of the series' roots, once again backseating the humans in favor of spotlighting humanity's unease with both the supernatural and its own spiritual beliefs.

Let me get this out of the way: Shin Megami Tensei V is not about plot. The story wastes little time whisking your androgynous protagonist away from his humdrum life as a high school student and flinging him headlong into the shadowy realm of Da'at, a post-apocalyptic Tokyo in which demons and angels are in an all-out war for supremacy. It's there that the protagonist gains the power of a Nahobino, a union of deity and human that has the ability to wield both powerful magic and a really cool lightsaber, gather an army of supernatural beings to fight by his side and use that army to fight anything and everything that stands between him and world salvation (or is it domination?), all while maintaining long, lush, perfectly conditioned hair. (The latter being the most impressive power-up of all!)

Despite being unwittingly caught up in a war between various heavenly pantheons, your hero takes his new post-apocalyptic duties in stride. So too do the other humans swept up alongside him (in one case quite literally). At first I was disappointed that over the course of my 70+ hour playtime I learned very little about these people; they were more personality types (awkward, shy, earnest) than fully developed characters. As I spent more time in the dystopian world of Da'at however, I began to realize that this lack of humanity was entirely the point. Just like in other MegaTen entries, these characters weren't there to answer my questions about who they were and what they believed I should do. I was there to answer *their* questions about who *I* was and what I believed *I* should do. Once I understood that, I began to appreciate my journey through Da'at a lot more.

At a glance, there's not much to Da'at. It's a bleak, desolate realm full of shifting sands, negative spaces and shattered, collapsed buildings that serve as haunting reminders that Tokyo was once a thriving city. It's appropriately chilling (as is the excellent soundtrack by Shoji Meguro with its eclectic mix of pop and somber dirges), but visually Da'at has little to offer in terms of variety. That's OK though, because I still enjoyed being there. It's a refreshingly vertical world that's easy to ping-pong around, and I got a kick out of surfing Da'at's sand dunes, springing up its oversized blocks of concrete and getting the drop on enemies that didn't see me whizzing around a corner at a dead run.

The only downside to speed-running the map is that it makes the game's unfortunate visual hiccups like frame stuttering and pop-in textures much more obvious; sometimes the protagonist doesn't even have to be moving to see these things. I cringed every time my pixie friend Navi – *er,* I mean Amanozako – tried to call my attention to something on the map with a janky flailing of her arms. These hiccups aren't game-breaking by any means, but they do make SMT V feel unpolished.

8.0

Luckily, I was usually too busy having fun exploring to let these choppy movements get me down. The Nahobino is almost always accompanied by a fairy who will lead you to useful hidden treasure (or sometimes hidden enemies) if you follow them, and it felt rewarding to stumble on petrified rock demons that, when touched, leveled up my entire party. On the other hand, I was constantly fuming over being forced to run in circles looking for my next destination, an unfortunate side effect of a poorly designed mini-map that practically required a microscope and a cartographer to figure out how to read. Alongside a maddening difficulty spike at the end of the story, the mini-map is easily the most infuriating thing about Shin Megami Tensei V. And yet, as frustrating as navigating parts of Da'at might be, peering into every nook and cranny looking for items that would help me in battle was vital if I wanted to survive the ongoing war between supernatural beings.

Let me be clear: Shin Megami Tensei V is fun, but its turn-based combat can be a harsh, unforgiving experience. Powerful deities (almost all of which are filed under the term "demon") who don't appreciate you interfering in their affairs will attempt to tear you limb from limb, and defeating them not only means figuring out their weak points (e.g. Jack Frost is weak to fire spells, Loki to light spells, etc.) but deploying every buff and debuff spell in your arsenal. Careless or lazy actions (like the time I accidentally used a wind spell on a demon that deflects that element) will result in swift and brutal defeat.

The ante is upped even more by the introduction of the Magatsuhi meter, an overdrive gauge that slowly fills up with every successfully dodged attack or hit. When maxed out, this meter gives access to special skills that can significantly increase a party's defense or offense for one round, giving them a much-needed edge in battle. Since both sides have access to their own Magatsuhi skills, I often found myself in a nerve-wracking race to see which side would annihilate the other first. It's certainly a challenge, but this challenge allowed me the perfect excuse to have fun tweaking and experimenting with my hero and his demonic crew in ways I wouldn't have otherwise.

The Nahobino may have zero personality, but thanks to the game's emphasis on customization, I could min-max him to be the exact type of hero I needed him to be at any given moment. Skill points acquired every time my protagonist leveled up could be spent increasing his physical strength, magic power or ability to dodge incoming attacks and survive death-dealing blows. Demon essence (a set of skills that belong to a particular demon) collected from enemy drops, treasure chests and willing demonic allies allowed me to easily swap out my Nahobino's elemental affinities and special skills with strategic precision; and though demons recruited from the battlefield cannot change their affinity in the same way, they can inherit skills from other demons that allow them to block or nullify attacks they would otherwise succumb to in a hurry. It's a good thing too, because surviving some of the tougher bosses in the game meant my Nahobino and his ethereal buddies needed to have the right skills equipped at the right time. It also meant I had to have the right demons in my party.

If you're familiar with MegaTen, then you know that convincing demons to join your team and help you save the world is a key element of the series. There are two ways to go about doing this: You can either try luring demons into joining your party via a series of negotiations, or visit an eerie void known as the World of Shadows, where its mysterious overseer Sophia will not only let you change your party's skills and affinities via the Apotheosis system, but let you fuse together demons in order to create an entirely new being.

For me, creating demons and then customizing them to my exact specifications is easily the best part of SMT V. I spent hours giddily diving into the alchemy of blending together demons of every shape, size and species imaginable. I gleefully sacrificed my pixie and preta demons to make a beautiful mermaid that could freeze enemies with her scream, reluctantly offered up two powerful Norse deities to create an even mightier one and cobbled together multiple monsters to create a special fusion known as Alice, whose terrifying "Die for Me!" spell could wipe out an entire enemy party with a mere crook of her finger. I also enjoyed pouring over the Demon Compendium – a record of all the demons I had collected or created –

as I determined which beings were the most compatible for fusion, or needed to be registered in case I wanted to summon them back after leaving my party.

And if I couldn't remember which skills or affinities a demon had so I knew which ones to bring to a fight, I could always consult the Analysis option in the main menu, which is packed with information about character stats, demon lore and quest information. Bringing up a demon's character sheet also gave me a chance to admire their charming (or terrifying) details. SMT V may not feature cutting edge graphics, but the beautiful, disconcerting art of series designer Kazuma Kaneko pops on the Switch, both on a TV and in Handheld Mode.

Of course, you can't fuse demons together unless they're already in your party, which is where demon negotiations come in. Once you enter combat you'll have the ability to "talk" to your enemies, who for whatever reason will start peppering you with questions about everything from your convictions to your Nahobino's flowing tresses. These negotiations are usually brisk and business-like, but they can also provide some of the most humorous and thought-provoking moments in the game. Like the time two adorable sprites from Hokkaido spontaneously conversed about their homeland before one of them cheerfully gifted my party a handful of revival beads and went about their merry way. Or the time a certain god of mischief decided it was much more fun to pick a fight with a valkyrie than pick them for an ally. It was moments like these that provided unexpected bits of warmth and humor.

Usually, however, things are more straightforward: Answering a demon's questions correctly can result in a new team member; the wrong dialogue choice will result in a demon trying to kill you. And even if they like what you have to say, these shrewd, moody bargainers (their willingness to engage depends on the phases of the moon) will usually demand money, items or even health before agreeing to partner with you.

In short, attempting to woo demonic comrades is always a bit of a guessing game, and figuring out what an erstwhile ally wants requires a bit of trial and error. Happily, there's a way to recover if you gum up any negotiations (which I often did). By defeating mini-bosses known as Abscesses that are strewn across the map, you can unlock useful passive skills known as Miracles that allow you to increase your Nahobino's strength, better negotiate with demons and lower the cost of recovering health at Leylines, special save points that let you fast-travel around Da'at, teleport to the World of Shadows or visit a creepy item shop known as Cadaver's Hollow (run by an equally creepy cadaver named Gustave).

Of course everything has a price, and in order to actually learn a Miracle you'll have to fork over your collection of Glory, ethereal energy crystals either given to you by strange creatures known as Miman hidden amongst the ruins of Da'at, dropped by enemies or found in some out-of-the-way place on the map (usually perched precariously on a ledge). Acquiring Glory was definitely a pain at times, but being able to unlock a skill that filled my Magatsuhi meter faster or allowed me to have more demons in my party certainly made it worth the effort.

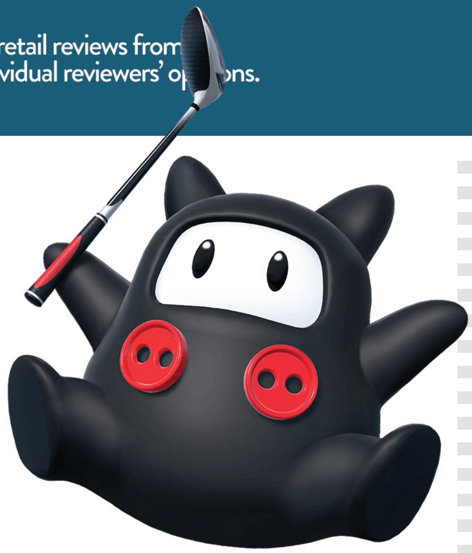
Make no mistake, though: This game requires a *lot* of effort. Even with three difficulty levels to choose from and the ability to quickly fast-travel around the map, Shin Megami Tensei V demands hours of patient level grinding, negotiating and demon fusing. It's all part of an extremely effective and enjoyable gameplay loop, but the grind can wear you down, and despite constantly running into new challenges, new demons and even New Game Plus options, by the time I reached the final dungeon I was ready for my journey to be over.

Ah, but what a journey! After eight years of waiting, the fifth installment of MegaTen is finally here, and it manages to deliver a satisfying experience. It may not have the deepest plot or most interesting cast of human characters, but it's fun, and I appreciate that it challenged me to think more about myself, my beliefs and how I view the world around me. And how many games can do that?

— MEGHAN

ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force retail reviews from the past two years. Scores reflect individual reviewers' opinions.



SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
AI: The Somnium Files	8.5	Tony	#44
Alex Kidd in Miracle World DX	7.5	David	#54
Animal Crossing: New Horizons	9.0	Rebecca	#46
Ary and the Secret of Seasons	6.0	Lucas	#49
Atelier Ryza 2: Lost Legends & the Secret Fairy	8.0	Maggie	#51
Bakugan: Champions of Vestroia	6.5	Lucas	#51
Balan Wonderworld	5.0	Lucas	#52
Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night	7.5	Tony	#48
Bravely Default II	9.0	Nadia	#52
BurgerTime Party!	8.0	Lucas	#44
Catherine: Full Body	8.5	Jonathan	#49
Clubhouse Games: 51 Worldwide Classics	8.5	Lucas	#48
Cobra Kai: The Karate Kid Saga Continues	6.5	Kris	#50
Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time!	8.5	David	#52
Cruis'n Blast	8.0	David	#56
DC Super Hero Girls: Teen Power	7.0	Kris	#53
Deadly Premonition 2: A Blessing in Disguise	7.0	Jonathan	#49
Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth – Complete Edition	8.5	Josh	#44
Doki Doki Literature Club Plus!	8.5	Rebecca	#55
Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot	6.0	Kris	#56
Friday the 13th: The Game – Ultimate Slasher Edition	8.0	Kevin C.	#46
G.I. Joe: Operation Blackout	6.5	Lucas	#54
Heroland	7.0	Rebecca	#45
Hot Wheels Unleashed	7.5	Lucas	#56
Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity	8.5	Tony	#50
Ice Age: Scrat's Nutty Adventure!	5.0	Chris	#45
Indivisible	7.0	Tony	#47
John Wick Hex	7.5	Chris	#51
Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory	7.0	Tony	#50
Langrisser I & II	8.5	David	#46
Layton's Mystery Journey: Katrielle and the Millionaires' Conspiracy	8.5	Brett	#45
Luigi's Mansion 3	9.0	Chris	#44
Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games: Tokyo 2020	8.5	David	#44
Mario Golf: Super Rush	9.0	Lucas	#54
Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit	9.5	Lucas	#49
Mega Man Zero/ZX Legacy Collection	9.0	David	#45
Metroid Dread	9.0	Tony	#56
Miitopia	7.5	Brett	#53
Model Debut #nicola	7.0	Rebecca	#44
Monster Hunter Rise	9.0	Lucas	#52
Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings of Ruin	9.0	Maggie	#54
Moving Out	8.0	Lucas	#47
NEO: The World Ends with You	8.0	Rebecca	#54
New Pokémon Snap	9.0	Lucas	#53
New Super Lucky's Tale	9.0	David	#44
Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom – Prince's Edition	8.5	Brett	#56
Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl	7.5	Brett	#56
Nickelodeon Kart Racers 2: Grand Prix	7.0	David	#50
No More Heroes III	9.5	Jonathan	#55
Paper Mario: The Origami King	8.5	Brett	#48
Paw Patrol Mighty Pups: Save Adventure Bay!	8.5	Lucas	#51
Persona 5 Strikers	9.0	Maggie	#52
Pikmin 3 Deluxe	9.5	Lucas	#50
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Rescue Team DX	8.0	Lucas	#46
Pokémon Shield	9.0	Thor	#44
Pokémon Sword	8.0	Lucas	#44
Puyo Puyo Tetris 2	8.5	Rebecca	#50
R-Type Final 2	7.5	Jonathan	#53
Ring Fit Adventure	8.5	Matthew T.	#44
Rune Factory 4 Special	7.5	Rebecca	#46
Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin	8.5	Lucas	#50
Shadowverse: Champion's Battle	8.0	Maggie	#55
Snack World: The Dungeon Crawl – Gold	6.0	Brett	#45
Story of Seasons: Friends of Mineral Town	7.5	Rebecca	#48
Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town	6.5	Rebecca	#53
Super Mario 3D All-Stars	7.0	Lucas	#49
Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury	10	Lucas	#51
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz	7.5	David	#44
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania	8.5	David	#56
The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles	9.0	Rebecca	#54
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III	9.0	Maggie	#49
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel IV	9.0	Maggie	#52
The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword HD	9.0	Lucas	#54
The Ninja Saviors: Return of the Warriors	7.0	Jonathan	#44
The Outer Worlds	8.0	Matthew L.	#47
The Wonderful 101: Remastered	9.0	Jonathan	#47
Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE Encore	7.5	Matthew L.	#46
Transformers: Battlegrounds	7.5	Lucas	#54
Trials of Mana	8.5	Brett	#47
Trine 4: The Nightmare Prince	9.0	Lucas	#44
WarioWare: Get It Together!	7.5	Rebecca	#56
World's End Club	6.5	Kris	#55
Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition	10	Lucas	#48
Ys IX: Monstrum Nox	9.0	Lucas	#55

UPDATE ALERT
MARIO GOLF: SUPER RUSH

THREE ISSUES AGO, I sang the praises of Super Rush and heartily recommended that everyone check out this latest sequel in the Mario Golf series. Now I need to amplify that praise to an even greater degree, because the game has been made even more compelling after the launch of several free updates!

When it first went on sale last June, Super Rush shipped with six different golf courses. Now that total has nearly doubled, as five extra venues have been added as free DLC!

The snow-covered Blustery Basin is festooned with Ty-foos hoping to blow your shots off-target, while the beauty of the desert sunset in Spiky Palms will try to distract you from the Spikes and Pokeys who are aiming to pinprick your player character. Both are challenging courses that were added in September.

Even more difficult is the November addition, All-Star Summit, which is filled with holes shaped like Mario, Luigi and the rest of the core cast alongside plenty of hovering blocks and collectible Coins that will boost your Special Shot meter if your ball sails near enough to grab them. It was counterbalanced by Shelltop Sanctuary, a course of nothing but Par 3s that's a little more approachable.

But the best of the bunch was the first to arrive, back in August: New Donk City! The same playable level layout seen in Super Mario Odyssey was brought over into this Mario Golf game, and it's a blast to hit golf balls through the city streets, over the rooftops and off of windows, pavement and parked cars. It's an inspired addition that I'm looking forward to revisiting again and again.

New courses haven't been the only additions! New characters have joined the roster as well, including Toadette, Shy Guy, Koopa Troopa, Wiggler and the little guy hopping for joy at the top of this page: Ninji! A delightful choice for old-school Mario gamers like me, Ninjis first appeared way back in Super Mario Bros. 2, but this is the first time one has ever been made playable in any Mario spin-off!

Finally, two all-new modes rounded out the free DLC additions: "One-On, One-Putt," which tasks you to clear holes in just two strokes, and Target Golf, a precision challenge. Sadly, it looks like my favorite, XC Golf, is doomed to stay locked down in the story mode. Oh well! It gives me something to hope to see in the series' next sequel! **— LUCAS**

REALITY STAR INTERVIEW

SURVIVOR: GAMERS VS. GOLIATHS

How a friendship forged through common "nerdy" interests like Nintendo games helped a pair of Davids outwit, outplay and outlast!

TWO DECADES AGO, CBS introduced the world to Survivor, a reality show in which a group of strangers live together on an island, compete in challenges and vote each other out of the game, one at a time, until only one person remains – and that winner walks away with $1,000,000! It quickly became my favorite show, as the twice-annual new seasons that have aired ever since have kept the original idea fresh by bringing in new players and themes. One of the best recent seasons is #37, Survivor: David vs. Goliath (now streaming on Netflix!), which divided its players into two tribes based on the Biblical tale of overcoming overwhelming odds: One group was full of underdogs, while the other was filled with clear favorites. Then video games came into play? We sat down with two of the season's breakout stars, Davie Rickenbacker and Nick Wilson, to ask how that happened!

NF: Survivor is a game with only one winner – and yet, no one can make it to the end entirely on their own. The very people you're competing against have to also be your allies along the way, and in working together toward the common goal of getting closer and closer to the finish line, one Tribal Council at a time, it seems like some honest, genuine friendships get formed on the island. How were the two of you able to build a bond of friendship that has now lasted for years beyond the end of the show, even while you knew you were in the middle of a game that could only have one winner in the end?

DAVIE: Nick and I really bonded over our age and crude sense of humor. Being the two male millennials on the tribe, we had a lot in common, from meme culture to music to video games and even school. And both of us are frat boys! We knew early on that we would be there for each other.

When Nick was in trouble in the beginning for not helping build the shelter, it's funny because I was with him looking for idols, so of course I would have been able to help shift the target away from him if he had been in jeopardy of going home. It was really just a breath of fresh air having someone on the island that I didn't have to sugarcoat things with. I could be 100% me.

NICK: I was drawn to Davie's big personality from the jump. I think we both shared laughs at Pat putting so much effort into building the shelter while me and Davie were off already looking for idols and advantages in the beginning of the game. He was someone I could confide in to talk about my home and whenever I missed my then-girlfriend (now wife), he would sit and listen. We just had the utmost respect for each other from beginning to end – so much so that it bonded us past the game itself.

Davie, you self-identifying as a blerd (or "Black nerd") was kind of your introduction as a character on your season. (I'm pretty sure your early conversation with Christian was the only time Mario Kart has ever been mentioned on Survivor,

so thanks for that!) But the editing went a different direction for you, Nick, so the audience didn't see much of you two bonding over video games and the like. How did that conversation start?

DAVIE: OMG seeing them share that snippet of a conversation with Christian (who I still talk gaming with from time to time) was amazing! I loved that they showcased me as a Blerd, because usually Survivor will designate the Black guy as the challenge beast or the workhorse. But this time it was like "They can be nerdy too!" and that speaks volumes for the future on Black people on reality TV. In fact I got a great response on my Twitter (@itweetDavie) from a number of video game pages that loved the geek culture mentions on the mainstream show that we all love!

NICK: Davie and I started finding common interests with anime, and technically Pokémon is anime, so I'm sure that's where the conversation led. We talked about all of the fun nostalgic games from our childhood, like Pokémon Red, Blue & Yellow, DragonBall Z and even GoldenEye 007. Him being a "Blerd" and me being a "Nerd" is definitely part of the reason casting landed us on the David tribe. We as a whole were the perfect band of geeky misfits.

Nick, you went through the whole process of building relationships throughout the David vs. Goliath season, and because you emerged as the winner, part of your "prize" was getting thrown right back into the fire a second time! What was it like starting over from Square 1 with an entirely different set of players in the Winners at War season, and were you able to find the same kind of common ground in your love of video games with any of those cast members? I know Adam Klein is also a Twitch streamer, but the two of you didn't spend a ton of time on the same tribe — and when you did, you voted against him twice!

NICK: Playing my second time was nothing like my first, in that the first time was actually fun, lol. (Granted that could be because I won a million dollars in the process.) But honestly in Winners at War you had to navigate a lot of egos — a lot of players who have been doing this longer than you and thinking they deserve rights and privileges because of that, when in actuality we all were deserving of the same amount of respect. This is why I aligned with recent winners like Michele and Wendell. They too were millennials who didn't hold themselves in such high regard, which made me know that I could trust them. The bond that I made with Michele out there did get transferred to the real world, because we Twitch stream and play virtually together from time to time — and sometimes Adam will show up as well and there's no love lost just because I voted him out, haha!

And now for you, Davie, I also want to bring up the question of returning to Survivor for a second season. As one of the breakout stars of Season 37, you're definitely going to be high up on the casting team's call sheet whenever the next season with returning players starts coming into focus. Are the bonds you're building now through friendly things like playing video games with other former players going to have a real impact on a future season of the show? We saw some players in Winners at War get labeled as being in "The Poker Alliance" because they'd played cards together in the past. Are you actively building "The Pokémon Alliance" as we speak?

DAVIE: Ha! I would give my Master Ball away for a second shot at $1,000,000! During the pandemic a lot of Survivor alumni would come together to play online games. Myself, Survivor: Gabon's Super Smash Bros. legend Ken Hoang, Survivor: Edge of Extinction's Rubix Cube ambassador Big Wendy and Survivor: China's Twitch streamer extraordinaire Peih-Gee Law all have a small group for gamers that we hope will be more active in 2022. We have been in talks to play Mario Party together and if we are so lucky to return to the game, I will make it my life's mission to incorporate our gaming interests into the edit by any means possible!

How did you both first discover video games initially? What is it about them that keeps you coming back?

DAVIE: We both discovered video games at a young age and got so attached to them mainly because of our siblings. I have two brothers and Nick has two brothers — and we were both the middle child of three boys!

NICK: I also have sisters — playing video games with my brothers was a way to escape from them! Davie and I both started out with Super Nintendo and Game Boy getting attached to Pokémon games, wrestling games and racing games, to name a few.

Video games have a way of testing our minds in unique ways. Did your experience with playing games help you to play Survivor, whether it was related to forming relationships, solving puzzles or thinking through different situations?

NICK: Yes! Gaming 100% helped in my endgame in David vs. Goliath, and Davie helped me out at Final Tribal Council because he knew this! When Davie asked me "How are you a Goliath?" it was because he knew about my puzzle games that I had played and practiced and that started coming in clutch as the game progressed. I've always been one for puzzles, but when I discovered there were phone apps that have these types of games, playing them was most of what I did to help prepare me for the show, and it definitely paid off!

OK, we've talked Survivor, and we've talked video games, but we haven't yet talked about official Survivor video games! There have only been a few. Have either of you played any of them?

DAVIE: I was only aware of the one Survivor Wii video game, and I tried to get ahold of it before to maybe Twitch stream it, but the ratings it got were so bad that it's like finding a needle in a haystack. (Or an idol on a deserted island, haha!)

We'd both love to have the chance to play a Survivor video game like The Sims or Grand Theft Auto. Even a Mortal Kombat-style game with some Survivor legends would be fun! Can you imagine Sandra's fatality? "I CAN GET LOUD TOOOO! I'M AGAINST YOU RUSSELL. QUEEN STAYS QUEEN!" It would be glorious!

If CBS were to greenlight a new official Survivor game, how would you feel about seeing digital versions of yourselves as playable characters?

NICK: Wow, a digital version of myself would be a dream come true, especially since I'm really into sports games and in some odd way this would be like me truly ascending into the sports world. I'd be nervous though for whatever voice actor ends up portraying their country version of me.

DAVIE: I agree with Nick — a dream come true totally, and hopefully they'd let me do my own voice work for my character, which might help me propel my voice acting career and help me check that off my bucket list sooner than later!

Have you played any other Survivor-like games, like Among Us? Maybe with other past Survivors?

NICK: I played in and won a Survivor ORG game before playing actual Survivor, and honestly I would recommend this for anyone who plays before going to the island. I was able to pick up skills like clues to opponents being untruthful. I saw what it felt like to be a team player in certain challenges and what it feels like to lose.

Michele and I got together a lot virtually during quarantine to play Settlers of Catan. I've even played with Rick Devens and Malcolm Freberg, just to name a few others. Playing with Survivor alumni always gives a great nostalgic feeling, because if you're playing where you see each other you can't help but to trade some Survivor horror stories!

DAVIE: I actually hate playing video games that remind me of Survivor strategy-wise. Maybe it's because my ending experience was a lot different than Nick's, being that he won his first season! But giving players an opportunity to be distrustful for free just isn't my idea of a good time — add a $1,000,000 prize, though, and I'm all in!

Finally, if the entire cast of David vs. Goliath got together and played a Mario Kart tournament, who would come out on the top?

DAVIE: Of the entire cast we have quite a few who are into gaming: John, Dan, Carl, Lyrsa, Gabby and Christian are all video game savvy. When it's all said and done, though, they all know that Nick and Davie are double dashing to the finish line! NF

twitch.tv/itwitchDavie

twitch.tv/KentuckyNick

INTERVIEW BY LUCAS M. THOMAS & MAGGIE JONES LUTEY

A.I.-GENERATED FAKEMON

POKÉMON ABOMINATIONS

Game Freak has never gone this freaky!

YOU CAN EXPECT to encounter some never-before-seen monsters as you explore the Hisui region in Pokémon Legends: Arceus, but don't plan on running into any that are as crazy-looking as the creatures seen above! These are just a few of the new Pocket Monster designs created not by any human's imagination, but rather by an artificial intelligence. They were all made by a computer!

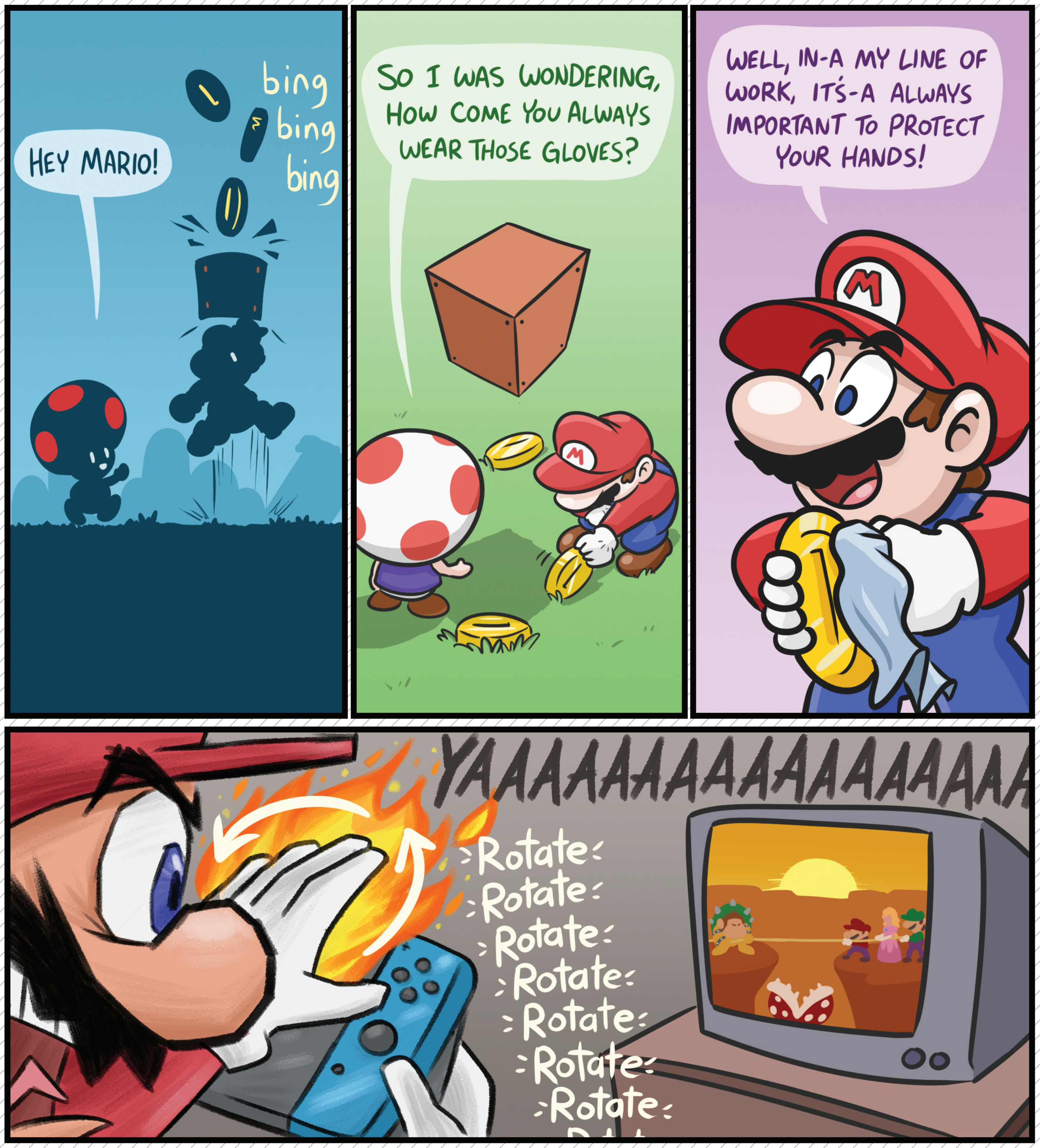
Max Woolf, a data scientist and expert at A.I. engineering who works at BuzzFeed, took all of the official artwork of actual Pokémon creatures and fed them all into a neural network he'd designed – then he commanded the program to take what it had learned from looking at the real deal and make its own best attempts at creating new Pokémon. These are just a few of the results! He's shared many more via his Twitter account.

Clearly a computer can't have a full grasp on what a real Pokémon design requires, as some of these are just shapeless lumps. And yet, a few of them seem like they could actually be getting close to something that would work? Like a rough draft that an artist might have sketched out quickly, then later planned to come back to refine. That's kind of wild, don't you think?

Which freak is your favorite? **— LUCAS**

@minimaxir

MARIO in GLOVE HURTS



BY MATTHEW TARANTO

NEXT ISSUE

Is Kirby's cuteness a curse? This cheerful little ball of smooshy pink fluff always keep smiling no matter what wild and chaotic circumstances he finds himself facing, and because he's so unstoppably happy, Nintendo keeps flinging him face-first into more and more bleak and upsetting scenarios! In the upcoming **Kirby and the Forgotten Land**, the ever-hungry star warrior finds himself exploring perhaps the saddest scene he's ever seen: a city without any people left to live in it! What happened there? How did Kirby get there? *And are there any Maxim Tomatoes left to eat amongst the wreckage?!*

We'll explore all those questions and more in the next edition of Nintendo Force, as well as turning our attention to other games that have set their stories in similarly stark and uninviting places. Don't venture into any wastelands without NF #58!

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #58:

KIRBY AND THE FORGOTTEN LAND

SPLATOON 3

ADVANCE WARS 1+2: RE-BOOT CAMP

POKÉMON LEGENDS: ARCEUS

RIANGLE STRATEGY

UNE FACTORY 5

EGEND
DA:
HE

S

DING

BRAIN ACADEMY:
AIN VS. BRAIN

ENTINELS:
EGIS RIM

NIC FRONTIERS

SEA OF STARS

DRAGON QUEST XII: THE FLAMES OF FATE

METROID PRIME 4

CHOCOBO GP

AND MUCH MORE!

MARCH/APRIL 2022

NINTENDO FAN BLUEY

MAKING THE ROUNDS on social media recently was the screenshot seen below – an image instantly recognizable to any of you parents or grandparents out there with young children in your lives, but maybe a mystery to our other readers. So, if you don't know already, this is a scene from Bluey.

Bluey is an absolutely extraordinary cartoon made for kids. It's so charming, so heartwarming and so perfectly wholesome that I think it may be impossible to dislike – it's just that good! It's genuinely the best children's cartoon I've personally ever seen, and after having been a father for over a decade now *and* after adding in all the memories of shows I'm still able to recall from my own childhood, that's high praise indeed.

So I didn't think I could love Bluey any more – and then I saw this screenshot. You'll need to have a bit of knowledge of Fire Emblem: Three Houses to get the gags, but printed on two of the boxes in the background are "Dimitri" and "Claude" . . . two of the main characters from Three Houses! Edelgard's name also pops up about two seconds later, as Bluey's Mom continues pushing her pups forward in the shopping cart. Dimitri and Claude are the funniest inclusions, though, because Claude's name appears to be upside-down (a reference to Claude himself being upside-down on the game's box art), and Dimitri is spelled "Dmitri" (so it's missing an "i" – a reference to, well, kind of a story spoiler, but his eyepatch-wearing promo art that was released back when the game came out helps connect those two easy dots).

What does all this mean? Bluey has team members working on it who are Nintendo fans, and who gave parents watching alongside their kids this fun Easter egg to find! Thus making a great show even greater. Have you ever seen Nintendo references snuck into other shows before? Keep an eye out! **– LUCAS**

P.S. If you want to spot this scene yourself, it's in Season 2, Episode 1: "Hammerbarn." See it on Disney+!

PATREON.COM
/NINTENDOFORCE

/NINTENDOFORCE

WWW.
NFMAGAZINE.COM

YouTube
/NFMAGAZINE

@NINTENDOFORCE